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[Liu Yao: The Revitalization of Fuyao Sect](#)

Volume I: The Roc's Long Flight [2]

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Chapter 1

Cheng Qian was at the **nominal age** [3] of ten, but he grew too slowly to keep up with his age.

Around noon, he carried firewood from the courtyard into the central hall. As it was hard for him to carry a whole bundle, he had to run back and forth twice. He only then wiped off the sweats and buried himself in cooking.

His father was busy receiving a guest these days, so chores including washing dishes, cooking, making fires and chopping firewood, all fell on his shoulders, driving him as busy as a spinning top, as if he could raise a tired wind anytime and anywhere.

Due to his short stature, it was somewhat inconvenient for him to operate a large pot, although he could already reach the top of the kitchen range. So he got a stool from the corner to step on.

The four legs of the stool varied in length. Since the age of six, Cheng Qian had learned to cook stepping on it. Heaps of times he came close to falling into the pot and turning himself into a broth, but eventually he managed to get on in harmony with that uneven stool, keeping an unstable balance.

Today, his big brother came back when he was adding water to the pot on that stool.

His big brother was already fifteen, and had grown into a young man. He walked in the central room silently with a smell of sweat, took a sweeping

look around, then lifted his young brother down from the stool and gave him a rude push on the back. “Leave it with me.” He said in a muffled voice, “You can go and play.”

Cheng Qian, of course, wouldn’t really go out. “Big Brother!” The lovely boy called out, and then squatted aside, blowing the bellows loudly.

Cheng **Dalang** [4] looked down at him with complicated eyes, not uttering a word.

There were three sons in his family, Cheng Qian was the second. He had been called “Cheng Erlang” until a guest’s arrival the previous evening.

Dalang was aware that he could hardly call “Erlang” anymore, for his second brother, along with the convenient nickname, would make a complete change and go somewhere far away.

The guest that visited the day before was a Taoist, whose name was unknown. He unblushingly referred to himself as “**Muchun Zhenren** [5]”. But he might not necessarily have any genuine abilities, judging by his appearance — he had a sparse goatee, a pair of half-closed bird eyes and slender feet showing beneath the pleats of his robe fluttering in the wind — he was more like a fortune-teller who swindled and bluffed than an immortal with an ethereal bearing.

Zhenren just passed by on his tour. He came up to ask for a bowl of water and never expected to see Cheng Erlang.

Cheng Erlang had only just run back home from outside then — there was an old **Tongsheng** [6] in the village, who had failed in the imperial examinations many times. He recruited students and taught them reading. In spite of his very little learning, he demanded quite high emoluments. He turned up his nose at things like self-made cured meats, fruits and vegetables, and only true gold and silver would be accepted. Moreover, the amount depended — as soon as he pissed it all away, he'd stretch out to his students for more.

As a man with such bad conduct, he was totally unqualified to be a teacher, who could transmit wisdom, impart knowledge and resolve doubts. But there was just no way, as it wasn't easy for children in rural areas to get education, considering that there wasn't a second teacher within a radius of one hundred **Li** [7].

In light of their family circumstances, the Chengs definitely couldn't afford tuition for their sons' schooling. But those unpronounceable archaisms seemed to appeal to Cheng Qian especially. Since he couldn't walk in the classroom decently, he had to eavesdrop periodically.

In the old Tongsheng's opinion, every spay of his saliva was the crystallization of his painstaking efforts, which was not for free. Therefore, he would often go out on a patrol halfway through his lecture.

Accordingly, Cheng Erlang hid in the tall Chinese scholar tree in the old Tongsheng's courtyard like a monkey. Every time the theory of "*self-cultivation, family harmony and world peace*" would bring him out in a sweat.

Last night, in such a sweat, Cheng Erlang handed a bowl of water to a guest at his father's instruction. But oddly enough, the guest didn't take it. Instead, he reached out his hand that was as skinny as a leafless branch. He didn't feel Erlang's bones, though, nor did he use any strange cultivation method. He simply raised Erlang's head and took a look straight into eyes of the young child, who tried hard to put on an air of "bookishness".

Somehow Zhenren seemed to see something from that look. He nodded strangely and said with an air of importance, "If you ask me, this kid is blessed with great endowments. In the future, he may acquire the ability of soaring up to the sky and diving deep to the sea, and perhaps great fortune waits ahead. He is no mediocre but will go far!"

Dalang was also present when Zhenren said so. Being apprenticed to a shopkeeper, he had seen people traveling south and north. So he considered himself as a man of knowledge and experience, yet he had never heard that one could judge another's endowments by a mere look.

Dalang was thinking of contradicting the charlatan, but before he could open his mouth, he was surprised to find that his father actually had believed such nonsense. And all of a sudden, he got shocked by what had just occurred to him.

His family wasn't wealthy, especially after his mother gave birth to his youngest brother before the turn of the year. It was a difficult labor, and since then, she had been so weak that she always had to stay in bed. As a consequence, there was an invalid mother in the family who lived on medicine in replace of a healthy woman who could work.

The harvest of this year was bad. With no rain for months, there was going to be a severe crop failure. The three brothers... their family was unlikely to afford to feed them all.

Dalang knew exactly what his parents thought. He had served as an apprentice for a year and a half, and in one year or so, he would be able to make money back and become the hope of his family. While his youngest brother was still a baby in swaddling clothes, it was naturally difficult for parents to part with him. As for Erlang in the middle, he seemed quite superfluous. Perhaps he'd be better off cultivating himself with that Taoist.

If he struck it lucky and did succeed, that would be terrific. Even if not, it wouldn't matter whether he lived by fortune-telling or cheating, as long as he could feed himself and grow up. Both were his own life paths.

Muchun Zhenren and the short-sighted master of this family soon reached a "deal" through talks. Zhenren left a silver ingot and Cheng Erlang would go with him. From this moment on, he would no longer be "Cheng Erlang" but "Cheng Qian". This afternoon, he was going to cut off the bonds of this world and set off with his master.

Dalang was several years older than his second brother. They didn't talk much and were by no means close to each other. Whereas this younger brother had been sensible from a very young age. He neither blubbered for no reason nor stirred up any trouble. He wore what his big brother had worn, ate what his mother and younger brother had eaten, only took the lead when it came to chores, and never complained.

Dalang loved and cared for this brother from the bottom of his heart, though he failed to say it.

But he just couldn't help it. The family was too poor to rear him. He was yet the mainstay of the family, his words wouldn't count.

But anyway, that was their own flesh and blood, how should they be so ruthless to sell him?

The more Dalang thought about it the worse he felt. An idea popped into his mind that he should hit that old charlatan's head to a hole with a big iron ladle. But in the end, he failed to muster up the courage — after all, he wouldn't have been a mere apprentice if he'd got the courage. Wouldn't he make much more money by plundering and looting?

Regarding his parents' plan and big brother's pent-up frustration, Cheng Qian wasn't completely in the dark.

Honestly, he wasn't very precocious, definitely couldn't be mentioned in the same breath with some child prodigies who were able to compose poems at the age of seven, or those that were appointed as prime minister at the age of thirteen. He was only a little oversensitive.

Father started work from dawn to dusk. Big Brother went to work with stars shining and came home with the moon up. Mother didn't hold him in her eyes as there were already his brothers. Therefore, even if no one beat or scolded him, no one would take him seriously either. Cheng Qian was well aware of that and he was tactful enough not to look for trouble. The most

outrageous thing he had done ever since his birth was to climb up the big tree of the old Tongsheng's, and listen to him explaining those trashy saints' books.

Cheng Qian worked conscientiously and diligently. He thought of himself as a young waiter, worker, servant — but never a son.

A kid should be talkative and restless. Now that Cheng Qian wasn't a son, he naturally didn't enjoy the privilege of being garrulous and naughty. He had been used to holding back his innermost feelings, and overtime, the words that couldn't be let out had to pierce inside, **poking a lot of tiny holes in his little heart** [8].

The boy with thousands of holes in his heart knew that he was sold by his parents. But bizarrely, he felt surprisingly calm, as though he had expected this day to come.

Before leaving, Cheng Qian's ailing mother got out of bed once in a blue moon. She called him aside with a trembling voice, and gave him a parcel with eyes red. There were several pieces of clothing and a dozen pancakes. Needless to say, the clothes must be altered from his big brother's, and the pancakes were made by his father the previous afternoon and evening.

He was her own flesh and blood, after all. Gazing at him, his mother couldn't help reaching her hand into her sleeve and shipped out a string of copper coins shakily. The bumpy and tarnished coins suddenly struck a chord with Cheng Qian slightly. He was like a small frozen animal, sniffing

gingerly in a world of snow and ice, and somehow scented the smell of Mother.

His father also caught sight of that string of coins, however. He coughed heavily from the side, and his mother was forced to put it back, tears in eyes.

The smell of Mother was like flowers in a mirror and the moon's reflection in the water, all of a sudden, vanished into the air again, before Cheng Qian could give a second sniff.

"Come here, Erlang." His mother held Cheng Qian's hand and took him into the inner room. She started panting within just a few steps.

She was exhausted and got a bench to sit on. Pointing to the oil lamp hanging from the ceiling, she asked weakly, "Erlang, do you know what it is?"

"Immortal Eternal Fire." Cheng Qian looked upward indifferently.

This lamp with undistinguished appearance was the heirloom of his family, which was said to be his great grandmother's dowry. It was palm-sized with no wick or kerosene. There were a couple of lines of Taoist magic figures carved on the old ebony lamp holder, with which the lamp could give out light automatically, forever illuminating an area of one **Chi** [9] square.

But Cheng Qian never figured out what the use of the crap was besides attracting bugs in summer.

But seeing that it was a magic tool, it was not necessary to have any practical use. As for a countryman, it could be handed down from generation to generation as a treasure, provided that he could show it off when the neighbors visited.

The so-called “magic tool” was something where there were charms carved by “immortals”. And it was impossible for the mortals to fake — there was a wide variety of magic tools with an even wider variety of uses, such as lamps that didn’t fuel kerosene, paper that didn’t burn, beds that were warm in winter and cool in summer, and so forth.

There once came a story-teller roving the country. According to him, there were large houses built with “Immortal Bricks” in bustling cities. It appeared as if it had been glazed in the sunlight and was as resplendent as a royal palace. And bowls that the rich used had charms written by high-level immortals on the outer side. Such bowls could avoid poisons and cure illnesses. One fragment of it was worthy of four **Liang** [10] of gold, yet was still pursued by many.

“Immortals”, that was, “cultivators”, and were also called “Daoren” or “Zhenren” — the former was usually used to call oneself to indicate humbleness.

Legend had it that they began with absorbing Qi from the natural world, and as their Cultivation Base leveled up, they became so powerful that they could refuse to eat, go up to the heaven and enter the earth, to such an extent that they’d enjoy eternal youth and become immortals at last after

they pulled through Heavenly Tribulations... but nobody had ever seen true immortals, and legends remained legends.

The immortals always drifted about with great uncertainty. Thus a good piece of magic tool was really a rare treasure, which high officials and noble lords all scrambled for.

Cheng Qian's mother bent over to look at him carefully. "When you returned, make an Eternal Fire for me, okay?" Asked his mother in a mild tone verging on blandishments.

Cheng Qian didn't reply. Raising his eyelids and looking at her, he thought to himself ungratefully, "You wish! From today on, whether I succeed or not, die or not, and whatever I become, I shall never come back to see you again."

Suddenly, his mother was seized with shock. She found that this kid wasn't like her or her husband. She saw her big brother in him instead.

Her big brother was born with ancestors' blessing. He was as pretty as a picture and was nothing like a countryman. His parents supported his study with all their might, and he was worth the price. He passed the imperial examination at the county level and became a Xiucai at the age of eleven. People said he was **Star of Wisdom** [11] descending from the sky.

However, Star of Wisdom probably didn't want to linger in the world for too long. He died from illness before he could pass the triennial provincial civil examination for the degree of Juren.

Cheng Qian's mother was very young when her big brother died, so some memory had blurred. But at this moment she suddenly recalled, that when he was alive, he was exactly the same as Cheng Qian — he would always understate his raptures and furies with merely a casual look, as if nothing appeared to ruffle his perfect composure. His poker face always forbade others from getting close to him.

Cheng Qian's mother let go of his hand in spite of herself, and at the same time, Cheng Qian took a half step backward unobtrusively.

Thus he put the separation of a son from his mother into an abrupt end mildly and firmly as well.

In Cheng Qian's mind, what he had done was not out of hatred. Actually, he got no reason to hate them — his parents gave him birth and raised him up. Even if they gave him up halfway, at most their faults offset their merits.

He looked down at his toes and said to himself, it wouldn't matter his parents didn't have him in their eyes, it was also nothing that they sold him to a bird-eyed Taoist.

Notes:

[1] Liu Yao: see [here](#).

[2] the roc's long flight : A roc can reach a destination of a myriad miles away at one jump — (said of those who) have a bright future.

[3] nominal age: according to a Chinese tradition, a person is considered one year old at birth, so that he will always be one year older than his actual age. See more [here](#).

[4] Dalang: in a Chinese family, the eldest son is often called Dalang (大郎) by his parents, the second son is called Erlang (二郎), and the third is called Sanlang (三郎).

[5] Muchun: a big tree with a very long life span.

Zhenren: see [here](#).

[6] Tongsheng: scholars that failed in the [imperial examination](#) (in the Ming and Qing Dynasties).

Xiucai: Tongsheng who passed the imperial examination at the county level (in the Ming and Qing Dynasties).

Juren: successful candidate in the provincial imperial examinations (in the Ming and Qing Dynasties).

[7] Li: a unit of length, equivalent to 500 meters.

[8] poking a lot of tiny holes in his little heart: it explains why Cheng Qian is oversensitive, because the Chinese idiom “one has many holes in his heart” means that “one is oversensitive”.

[9] Chi: a unit of length, equal to 1/3 meter.

[10] Liang: a unit of weight for silver or gold (about 31 grams).

[11] Star of Wisdom: a legendary god in charge of imperial examinations and literary affairs.

Chapter 2

Cheng Qian left with Muchun Zhenren.

Muchun Zhenren was thin and emaciated in a tattered hat, just like three sticks propping a head. He led Cheng Qian by the hand, like the ringmaster of a traveling troupe leading his newly recruited actor.

Although Cheng Qian remained a child in appearance, he already had a heart of a young man.

He walked in silence, but he couldn't help looking back in the end.

There, he saw his mother, carrying a basket on the back and face blurred by tears. He saw his younger brother, fast asleep in that basket. He saw his father as well, standing silently in the shadow, eyes fixed on the ground as if he was sighing.

Cheng Qian drew back his sight quickly as there was nothing to be nostalgic about. The road ahead was uncertain just as the boundless dark.

Basically, there were two ways of journeying. One was called "traveling", the other was called "roaming".

Following his master, Cheng Qian was drowned in heresies and sophistries, not to mention he had to eat in the wind and sleep in the dew, which was even worse than "roaming".

Speaking of cultivation and seeking Tao, Cheng Qian had heard a little about it.

There was once an excessive number of whimsical people following the trend of cultivating and seeking Tao.

During the late emperor's reign, sects big or small began to spring up all over the country like mushrooms. Any Tom, Dick or Harry, as long as he was blessed with descendants, would use all his connections to get his kids into those sects for the purpose of cultivation. Nevertheless, besides some tricks like "breaking the stone on one's chest", it was never heard that anyone had made real achievements.

At that time, there were more alchemists than cooks, more people chanting than farming, to such an extent that for years there was nobody reading books or practicing martial arts, giving rise to charlatans who didn't work.

Allegedly in the heyday of cultivation, as many as twenty sects were set up in only a county, while a county was no more than ten Li from east to west. They would collect ill-gotten wealth and recruit disciples in the name of cultivation, with some fake books on cultivation methods bought from peddlers.

God knows whether the **Heavenly Gate** [1] could hold them or not, if such people all ascended to immortality.

Even bandits would like to join in the tide. They changed their gang names from "Black Tiger Gang" and "Hungry Wolf Association" to "Breeze

Temple” and “Profundity Hall”. What was more ridiculous, they would play tricks like “fetching from boiling oil” and “fire breathing” before mugging, and the victims often got so scared that they would be robbed voluntarily.

The late emperor was primarily a soldier with short temper. He felt that at this rate, the country would collapse most surely. Thereupon, he issued an edict that all “immortals” rampaging through the countryside, whether true or fake, be arrested and banished to the military.

But before the world-shaking edict had found its way out of the palace, ministers of the imperial court got wind of it. They were shocked out of bed and queued up in front of the audience hall overnight — low-ranking officials in the front and high-ranking officials at the back, getting themselves ready to crash into the pillars before the hall. They were determined to admonish the emperor at the risk of their lives, lest he offend the immortals and ruin the longevity of the dynasty.

The emperor, of course, wouldn’t possibly have them die such a tragic death. Besides, the Dragon Pillars might not bear the impact.

The late emperor was forced to revoke the edict. The next day, he ordered Bureau of Astronomy to establish a new branch called “Office of Heaven’s Divination”, and invited several genuine immortals to take charge. Furthermore, he stipulated that from then on, all sects, big or small, could recruit disciples on condition that it had been authorized by Office of Heaven’s Divination and received an iron plaque as verification. Founding a sect without permission was forbidden.

Certainly, in such a great and impressive country as stretched across nine states, it was almost impossible for every order to be enforced strictly. Those one-size-fit-all decrees couldn't, let alone such relaxed rubbishing edicts.

On the one hand, the imperial court had been occupied in mopping up robbers and kidnappers, how could they spare time to mind those sect business?

On the other hand, true immortals took no notice of the emperor. They were bound up in their own affairs as before. Only charlatans restrained themselves a bit, but very limitedly — it wasn't impossible to forge whatever iron or copper plaques, anyway.

Fortunately, the late emperor's efforts weren't completely in vain. After repeated checks and eliminations, the passion for cultivation among the people was reduced significantly. Additionally, since it was never heard that anyone had made remarkable achievements, people went back to farming and shepherding overtime, instead of building castles in the air.

When the present emperor ascended the throne, although the popularity of cultivation was still lingering on with its last breath, the mania had already died. The emperor knew very well the principle that **fish do not come when the water is too clear** [2]. So he turned a blind eye to those swindlers in the name of cultivation. The officials wouldn't investigate as long as nobody reported.

Cheng Qian had heard those stories from the old Tongsheng before. So in his eyes, the wooden club leading him was no more than a wooden club... or at best a wooden club that provided meals, with nothing respectable.

Stroking his droopy mustache, club-like Muchun started talking nonsense, “Our sect is named ‘**Fuyao** [3]’. Do you know what Fuyao is, little creature?”

The old Tongsheng hated such things bitterly, and naturally wouldn’t waste his breath on it. As he was Cheng Qian’s first teacher, Cheng Qian was more or less influenced by him. Therefore, although he was full of disdain for Muchun, he pretended to be listening grudgingly.

Muchun lifted his hand up and pointed somewhere in front of Cheng Qian. Magically, a sudden blast of wind sprang up from out of nowhere, whirling withered grass up to the sky. There was a sharp line of yellow on the blade of the grass, lightened by a bolt of lightning cracking across the sky, which almost dazzled Cheng Qian’s eyes.

The young lad was flabbergasted at the weird scene.

Muchun froze too, as he himself didn’t expect that. But seeing that this brat who was friendly in appearance but estranged at heart was bluffed, he took advantage of it and withdrew his hand.

He tucked his hands in opposite sleeves and started parading his knowledge contentedly, “***When the roc travels to the Southern Ocean, it flaps along the water for three thousand Li, and then it soars upon a whirlwind to a***

height of ninety thousand Li, for a flight lasting six months [4] — with no shape or restraint, circling with the wind, coming from the deep sea and going up for the boundless sky, this is ‘Fuyao’, understand?”

Of course Cheng Qian didn’t understand. In his tiny heart, the awe of supernatural forces tangled inseparably with his disapproval for crooked tricks. At last, he nodded confusedly with disapproval as well as respect for his master, setting Muchun at the same place as the shabby lamp in his home.

Muchun stuck his mustache up complacently and was about to go on talking when he got a slap in the face — after the rumble of thunder, a strong wind whizzed along, putting out the bone fire before them, and then began to blow fiercely. Thunders together with lightning were exercising their voices like singers, conspiring to call the clouds with ill intent from the west.

Muchun forgot to play tricks any more. He called out promptly, “Damn! It’s going to rain!”

With that, he bounced to his feet. With one hand carrying their luggage on the shoulder, the other hand lifting Cheng Qian, he moved his reed-like legs and made off taking quick short steps like a long-neck pheasant.

Unfortunately, the downpour came so swiftly that it was difficult for even a long-neck pheasant to escape from becoming a soaked pheasant.

Muchun stripped off his drenched robe, and covered the little boy in his bosom with it. But that was merely better than nothing. “Oh, damn it! What heavy rain! I got to find a shelter.” He exclaimed as he ran.

Throughout his life, Cheng Qian would ride many birds and beasts for traveling in the future — but this was the bumpiest and most talkative one, without a doubt.

The sounds of wind, rain and thunder mixed up with his master’s noise. Under the shelter of the robe, Cheng Qian could hardly see anything, but he smelled an indescribable scent of wood from it.

His master held him before the chest with one hand and covered his head with the other. This old man was all skins and bones, thus hurt him a lot. Whereas, his bosom and protection were by no means false display of affection.

Somehow Cheng Qian was willing to get close to him despite the fact that the long-neck pheasant was talking big and playing tricks on him just a moment ago.

Draped in Muchun’s robe, Cheng Qian timidly peered through the chink in the cloth at his master, who was soaked through in the rain. For the first time in his life, he had enjoyed the treatment that a kid deserved. He soared for a short while and recognized this unreliable man as his master willingly. He even made up his mind — he would choose to forgive him even if he had a mouthful of nonsense and heresies.

Riding his skinny master, Cheng Qian finally arrived at a dilapidated temple.

The mass “eradication” during the late emperor’s reign had purged many unauthorized sects, but some temples of those sects survived and became rest places for homeless beggars and travelers who missed their lodgings.

Cheng Qian popped his head out of Muchun’s robe, and immediately caught sight of a clay joss enshrined in the temple, by which he was startled — it had a hard-featured look, with a round face and no neck, blusher applied to both cheeks, hair drawn into double tight buns, a fierce-looking mouth and a creepy smile showing its uneven teeth.

Master saw it too. He hurried to cover Cheng Qian’s eyes with his hand, and criticized furiously, “How could you have the cheek to enjoy offerings when dressing in such a lewd and vicious manner! The nerve of you!”

Due to his young age and very limited knowledge, Cheng Qian got stunned as well as confused.

“To cultivate, one is ought to purify his spirit, reduce his desires, and be prudent in his words and deeds. How disgraceful it is to dress up as an opera actor!” Said Muchun sternly.

He actually knew the word “disgraceful” ... Cheng Qian was considering reassessing him now.

At the very moment, a smell of meat wafted over from the back of the temple, and interrupted the “pure-spirited” mater’s tirade.

Muchun swallowed involuntarily and failed to continue his words. With an expression of confusion, he took Cheng Qian to the back of that joss, and a beggar who looked one or two years older than Cheng Qian showed up there.

It turned out that the beggar somehow managed to dig a hole at the back of the temple, and was roasting a **Beggar’s Chicken** [5] in it. He smashed the caked mud wrapping the chicken, and the whole temple was brimming with the scent.

Muchun swallowed once more.

Things would be quite inconvenient when one was as scrawny as him. For example, when the hunger struck, it was uneasy to conceal his instincts as the craning thin neck would give him away.

Muchun laid Cheng Qian down, and then showed his little apprentice what “cultivators must be prudent in his words and deeds” meant.

He wiped off the water on his face first, and put on a graceful smile like a genuine immortal. After that, he drifted over to the beggar unhurriedly taking tottering lily steps, then he started his lengthy luring speech in Cheng Qian’s presence. He sketched an image of a sect beyond the sea, where people wore gold and silver jewelry with no worries about food and clothes.

Unbelievably, it worked! His sweet words stimulated the little beggar's interest.

Facing the beggar who had a big head and a small body, Muchun continued sweet-talking him with fervor, "As far as I can see, you're blessed with great endowments. You can soar up to the sky and dive deep to the sea one day, and I see great fortune in you — boy, what's your name?"

Cheng Qian felt that his words sounded strangely familiar.

Sly though the little beggar was since he had lived a vagabond life, he was ultimately so young that he was easily lured. With a snotty nose, he answered innocently, "Xiaohu. I don't have a surname."

"Well then, I'll surname you Han, the same as mine." Stroking his mustache, Muchun confirmed their master-apprentice relationship very naturally, "As to the name, how about the single character — Yuan?"

Cheng Qian, "..."

Han Yuan [6], suffering an injustice... that was indeed an auspicious and joyous name.

Master must have been ravenous, so he spoke without measuring his words in face of the well toasted Beggar's Chicken.

Notes:

[1] Heavenly Gate: the entrance from the Mortal Realm to the Heavens.

[2]: A Chinese proverb which means “one should not demand absolute purity”.

[3] Fuyao: a whirlwind from the passage *Xiaoyao You*.

[4]: A quote from *Xiaoyao You*.

[5] Beggar’s Chicken: a whole chicken roasted in caked mud.



[6] Han Yuan: the pronunciation of this name is the same as “suffering an injustice” in Chinese.

Chapter 3

As Cheng Qian was apprenticed to Muchun earlier than Han Yuan, Han Yuan actually became his fourth junior brother, although Han Yuan was a little older than him. He had been Muchun's "**shut-door apprentice** [1]" for only a few days before he became a senior brother.

Obviously, the back door of Fuyao Sect was not shut tight.

As for the Beggar's Chicken... naturally most of it found their way into his master's stomach.

However, even chicken couldn't shut Muchun up. "Where was the chicken from?" He asked while eating. He seemed to have a habit of preaching.

Han Yuan had a skillful tongue — he didn't use hands to gnaw a bone. He simply put it whole into his mouth, puffed up his cheeks for a couple of times, and then chewed the gristle for a short while. At last only the clean and intact chicken bone was left.

"Bah!" He spat out the bone rudely and replied, "I stole it in the village ahead."

Confucius said, "*Chew with mouth closed, lay silent.*"

The Beggar's Chicken was certainly delicious. Cheng Qian was hesitating whether to eat a drumstick as his master did or not when he heard their conversation. After learning the ins and outs, he withdrew his hand

resolutely, and started nibbling at his pancakes that were as hard as stones wordlessly aside.

What flavor could the chicken be when the cook was such an indecent person?

From this perspective, his **Tao heart** [2] and principles were firmer than his incompetent master's in spite of his young age.

Apparently Han Yuan's answer didn't spoil Muchun Zhenren's appetite at all. He just spared a half of mouth from chewing and said wagging his head, "Taking without asking, that's what thieves do. As cultivators, how could we do pilfering? That's improper! Do it no more!"

Han Yuan mumbled "Yes". The little beggar knew nothing about manners, so he didn't dare to retort.

"Pilfering is forbidden, presumably swindling is fine then." Cheng Qian thought sarcastically. But presently he remembered the tolerance he granted his master just now in the downpour. He could only sigh to himself gloomily, "So be it."

The fourth junior brother had a small nose and a underbite. His small eyes glinted with slipperiness, which made him quite unlovable.

Cheng Qian didn't like Han Yuan at first sight. Not only was he unsightly, but also he took the title of "Junior Brother". Everything concerning "brothers", Cheng Qian found it hard to develop an affection for. But he just

buried his dislike deep in heart and pretended to be friendly and agreeable on the outside, although not very tactfully.

In Cheng Qian's family, newly cut clothes were on his big brother's body, and milk pastes with sugar were all into his little brother's mouth. In a word, good things would never descend on him. Conversely, he was often asked to do housework. Cheng Qian didn't have a lenient disposition, thus grudges naturally took root in his heart. On the other hand, he also bore what the old Tongsheng used to say in mind — *“The father should be kind, the son should be obedient; and good brothers should show love and respect”*. So he often felt that his grudges made no sense.

It was too early for such a young boy to have self-restraint. Cheng Qian couldn't really stifle his grudges, so he had to pretend to have no word of complaint — even if he was admitted into Fuyao Sect now, he still didn't change a thing.

Now that his master went back on his words and unshut the door, Cheng Qian had no choice but to lump it and try to be a senior brother up to the mark.

Along the journey, if there was any errand, he, the senior brother would run; if there was any food, he would let his master to enjoy first, junior brother the next, and himself the last. It was never an easy job. Cheng Qian had to reflect upon himself frequently, in case that he should damage his temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous image.

Cheng Qian often made such excessive demands on himself — his father had been poor and wretched for a lifetime. He was a vulgar and irritable man who was mean to him. Cheng Qian remembered the old Tongsheng's words. He dared not hate his father explicitly, so he pitied him inwardly. When waking up from dreams at midnight, this young lad would often think, he would rather die than become someone like his father.

For this reason, his fragile dignity was propped up in the narrow crevice between confusion and hardships with his utmost, and was something that he couldn't afford to lose, no matter what.

But Cheng Qian soon discovered that although he did quite a good job, the junior brother was really unworthy of his care — he had not only a repulsive appearance but an annoying personality.

First, Han Yuan was a real big talker. Before they met him, it was his master that played the role of making noise. But now, even Muchun Zhenren seemed quieter in contrast to him.

The little beggar could even blurt out a story about how he defeated a weasel that was one **Zhang** [3] in length, and snatched a chicken from its mouth, as though he was enlightened by Master's remarks on "**pilfering** [4]".

He gesticulated merrily when making up the story, which was well presented and full of twists in its plot, with opening, development, transition and conclusion all included. Every detail manifested his wisdom and mightiness.

“How on earth can a weasel be one Zhang long?” Asked Cheng Qian, trying to question him.

“It must be a weasel spirit! Master, can a weasel ascend to a spirit?” Han Yuan defended himself with his chin up and chest out, feeling that he was challenged.

Hearing the story about a weasel spirit, their master seemed to be offended by some word, for his expression was kind of strange, as if he had a toothache or stomachache. There was a moment of silence before he answered unhurriedly and absent-mindedly, “All nature objects have souls. Generally, they can all ascend to spirits.”

Han Yuan raised his chin cockily as though he was greatly encouraged by his master’s words, and then said deliberately, “Senior Brother, you marvel because you’ve seen little. If human beings can ascend to immortals, animals can turn into spirits absolutely.”

Cheng Qian didn’t reply but sneered inwardly.

Supposing a weasel was really one Zhang long, the odds were that it could hardly support his body with only four legs, for it was so long that its stomach was bound to trail on the ground as it moved.

Is it possible that a demonic cultivator took the trouble to cultivate only for a sturdy iron stomach that was rubbed bare by the ground?

With regards to what demonic cultivators strived for, Cheng Qian had no idea. But he did know what Han Yuan wanted.

The little beggar was as fierce as leeches in the sewer, once he scented the blood, he would desperately attach himself to it — Han Yuan was striving for their master's favor against him.

The little beggar would snatch at every chance to show off his bravery, and in the meantime, wouldn't forget to bring shame on his “weak and vulnerable” senior brother. Cheng Qian found it very funny to watch Han Yuan run about trying to disgrace him. So he did an imitation of the old Tongsheng and made a judgement on his fourth junior brother in his mind, *“A gentleman is firm in adversity, while a villain will give himself up to evil — little bastard, what kind of louse are you?!”*

After hearing Han Yuan's story of “fighting off a weasel spirit”, Cheng Qian got the chance to witness the “heroic achievement” of his bastard junior brother's the next day.

Their master was taking a nap under the tree that day. Cheng Qian was reading an old book that he found in their master's luggage. The wording was difficult to understand, and Cheng Qian had very superficial learning. So he and most part of the scriptures “met without knowing each other”. Nevertheless, Cheng Qian didn't feel bored and found pleasure in it — whatever the book said, it was his first above-board touch on a book, after all.

Of the two apprentices Muchun picked up, one was as still as a trunk, the other was as active as a monkey. The trunk, Cheng Qian was motionless; whereas the monkey, Han Yuan couldn't stop for a second.

At this moment, Han Monkey was nowhere to be found, and Cheng Qian was happy to have peace for ears. However, good times didn't last long, and Han Yuan came back crying.

“Master...” Han Yuan sobbed like a spoiled child.

His master's answer was a soft and flowing snore.

Thereupon, Han Yuan went on howling and shoot a glance at Cheng Qian beside him at the same time.

Cheng Qian doubted that their master actually had already waken but still pretended to be sleeping, with the intention of observing how the brothers got along. Now the junior brother was crying his eyes out, Cheng Qian as the senior brother, couldn't pretend that he didn't notice. So he put down the old book and asked with a kind and pleasant countenance, “What's the matter?”

“There's a river in front. I wanted to catch fish for Master and Senior Brother, but there's a dog on the bank, it ran after me.” Said Han Yuan.

Cheng Qian sighed to himself. Certainly he was also afraid of vicious dogs. But Han Yuan's eyes were darting everywhere and as he had explained, he was bullied by a dog because he wanted to catch fish for the master and

him. Now he asked his senior brother for help, how could the senior brother shrink?

He picked up a big stone, weighed it in his hand, and stood up. Then he said, “Fine. I’ll go with you.” With a kind and pleasant countenance again.

Cheng Qian made up a plan. If by any chance they met the dog, he’d hit the junior brother’s head with that stone, and make sure his head was beaten to a broken watermelon, then leave him to that dog.

However, by the time they arrived at the bank, the dog had gone, leaving several rows of footprints.

Cheng Qian looked down and studied the footprints for a while. He inferred that the “vicious dog” was less than one Chi in length, and was likely a small stray dog.

Han Yuan, you bastard! Coward! Idiot! Boaster! And wastrel! You have no sense of shame and know nothing other than how to fawn Master!

Cheng Qian told off Han Yuan in his heart as he put his hands that were holding a brick behind his back. Looking mildly at his good-for-nothing junior brother, he wasn’t in the mood to hit him now — Cheng Qian didn’t want to bother himself taking umbrage at him.

When they came back with fish, their master was “awake” and looking at them kindly with gratification.

Once Cheng Qian met his master's eyes, he had a terrible feeling in his stomach, and somehow felt like throwing up.

Before he could say anything, Han Yuan had gone up fawningly. He embroidered a story about "how Senior Brother wanted to eat fish, how he defeated a dog whose head was as large as a bull, and how he managed to dive into the river to catch fish".

Cheng Qian, "..."

He was nearly angered to laughter by his talented junior brother.

Like this, Cheng Qian, with an old charlatan and a little boaster, traveled for about half a month.

Eventually, they made it to Fuyao Sect.

It was the first time for Cheng Qian to travel so far. Thanks to the company of his weird master and junior brother, he had experienced many aspects of the human world, hence he became so composed that he even wouldn't be disturbed if mountains collapsed.

At first, he didn't look forward to the place sounding like a loose organization. He thought that probably it was also a shabby temple in a desolate place, where he had to burn joss sticks and kowtow to the "Founder of Fuyao Sect" who was properly dressed and always wore a smile.

But now it exceeded all Cheng Qian's expectations.

Fuyao Sect occupied a whole mountain which was surrounded by water on three sides. Taking a look up from the foot, Cheng Qian could have a good view of furious green waves and trees rippling in the breeze.

Chirps of birds and insects mingled with cries of cranes once in a while. Occasionally he could catch a fleeting glimpse of white silhouettes in the sky, and feel a magical aura skimming over the mountain there and then.

There were gentle stone steps extending from the foot to the top, and evidently they were frequently swept. A brook ran down from the top with clear and far-reaching gurgles.

Going up flights of steps to the mountain waist, Cheng Qian saw dimly courtyards and houses above. An old stone gate covered with moss stood majestically at the waist. The two characters “Fuyao” were written on it in a vigorous but graceful style like dragons flying and phoenixes dancing.

Cheng Qian was unable to tell whether the penmanship was good or bad. He only had the impression that the two characters were going to come alive and fly out of the gate, demonstrating some kind of loftiness as if they could really soar into the sky and dive into the sea.

This place wasn't some kind of celestial mountain away from the human world, which was veiled by mist and clouds and where people were free of worldly cares. Yet there were unspeakable beauties among the mountain. As soon as Cheng Qian stepped in the mountain, he could feel that he got much lighter with every breath.

He got a limited view of the palm-sized sky through gaps of green leaves. A sense of vastness that one could feel when watching the sky from the bottom of a well flooded him, putting him at such ease that he was itching to shout and laugh around the mountain.

But Cheng Qian restrained himself — he didn't dare to shout at home lest he be beaten by his father. Nor would he now, in case he should lose the decency he gained through eavesdropping in front of his despicable junior brother.

Master patted on the heads of his two apprentices, and said kindly, “Now go to **take a bath, burn incense and get your clothes changed** [5], then I'll take you to visit your...”

“The founder that always wears a smile?” Cheng Qian thought unconcernedly.

“First senior brother.” Said their master.

Notes:

[1] shut-door apprentice: last apprentice and is generally favored by the master.

[2] Tao heart: in narrow sense, the purpose and significance of cultivation.

[3] Zhang: a unit of length equal to 3.3333 meters.

[4] pilfering: the original word literally means “to steal chickens and dogs”, and it also refers to weasels (as they steal chickens and dogs).

[5]: preparation for a solemn occasion, sometimes a fast is required.

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Chapter 4

Why would a senior master “visit” his apprentice so formally?

Cheng Qian and Han Yuan were in a complete fog, while their master continued as if he wanted to confuse them more, “No worries. Your first senior brother is simple-minded; you don’t need to fear him. Just act as I do.”

Wait, what did you mean by “just act as I do”?

Anyhow, Muchun Zhenren successfully transformed the mist over his two little apprentices’ heads into thick soup.

As they passed through the gate, a few Taoist children came along the gurgling brook.

These Taoist children were all in their teens and looked smart and pretty like Golden Boys (attendants) of genuine immortals. Their sleeves were fluttering elegantly without wind.

Facing them, even Cheng Qian, who had been conceited all the way, somehow had a subtle sense of inferiority, not to mention Han Yuan that was already stupefied.

Owing to the very bit of subtle feeling, Cheng Qian was on the defensive spontaneously. He subconsciously changed into a stern look, straightened up his back, and wrapped up his curiosity and ignorance discreetly.

The leader of the Taoist children saw Muchun Zhenren from far away, and laughing came earlier than his appearance. “Sect Leader, where have you been this time? How did you get yourself so scrappy? — Oh! The... where did you abduct the young masters?” He said quite casually.

Cheng Qian studied his every single word and phrase carefully but failed to find the slightest respect in them, as if the Taoist child wasn’t greeting a “Sect Leader” but rather a “Uncle Han from the neighbor village”.

Muchun Zhenren didn’t mind at all. He even smiled breezily. Pointing at Cheng Qian and Han Yuan, he said, “They are my newly accepted apprentices. Could I trouble you to help them settle down?”

“Where should I settle them?” The Taoist child smiled.

“This one to the South Courtyard.” Muchun Zhenren pointed at Han Yuan carelessly. Then he lowered his head down and met Cheng Qian’s eyes by accident or design. His eyes had a clear distinction between black and white, revealing a hint of innate restraint and unobtrusive fluster of unfamiliar environments.

The casual smile hanging at the corner of Muchun Zhenren’s mouth suddenly faded. After a short while, he arranged the place for Cheng Qian in an almost solemn manner, “Take him to Side Pavilion.”

In fact, “Side Pavilion” wasn’t a pavilion but a small outlying courtyard that was somewhat secluded. On one side of the wall, there was a tranquil

stream running by; while on the other side, there was a bamboo forest, which was extremely peaceful.

Presumably the bamboo forest had been here for years, for even breezes sweeping through would be dyed emerald-green. The whole yard was like standing in a sea of bamboo, where the fresh green would cleanse one's mind of desires.

There was an Eternal Fire with charms hanging at each side of the door of the yard, which was more exquisite than the "heirloom" of Cheng Qian's family. The light halo was soft and wouldn't flicker in the wind. Between the two lamps hang a tablet, inscribed with two characters "Qing'an (quiet and peaceful)".

Apparently, they were written by the same person as the two characters "Fuyao" at the mountain waist.

The Taoist child guiding Cheng Qian was named Xueqing, nearly the same age as Cheng Qian's big brother. Xueqing was of medium build with ordinary features, who was the most inconspicuous among those Taoist children, but looked fairly comely when being watched attentively. He was taciturn and didn't enjoy the limelight.

"This is Side Pavilion, also called Qiang'an Dwelling. It's heard that Sect Leader once lived here, but he moved out afterwards. It was also used as Chanting Hall." Xueqing explained softly, "Does Third Martial Uncle know what Chanting Hall is?"

Actually Cheng Qian wasn't very clear, but he nodded, showing little concern. Following Xueqing into the courtyard, he saw a small pond of one Zhang square in the center. The holder made of black elm underneath was carved with charms, presumably for the purpose of stagnating the water — the water in the pond wasn't flowing or rippling.

But after taking a closer look, Cheng Qian found it wasn't a pond but a huge precious stone.

That stone was neither a jade nor an emerald, but it felt very cool. It was dark green faintly touched with a shade of blue, emanating chilly and serene tranquility.

Cheng Qian had never seen such a rare treasure before. Even if he didn't want to appear ignorant, he was seized with astonishment momentarily.

"I don't know what it is, but we call it Peaceful Stone. Sect Leader used to transcribe scriptures on it. With it, the yard will be much cooler in summer." Said Xueqing.

Pointing at the visible charms on the elm holder, Cheng Qian couldn't resist his curiosity and asked, "Brother Xueqing, what are these charms for?"

Xueqing didn't expect Cheng Qian to be so courteous to him. He was dazed by his polite form of address for a while, and then answered, "You're overwhelming me with more than I can bear, Third Martial Uncle — they are not charms."

Cheng Qian gave him a glance. Xueqing surprisingly caught a trace of restrained doubt from his look, as though his eyes could speak. Compared with the other kid the sect leader brought back, this one appeared more delicate and attractive.

Xueqing failed to find the proper words to describe his feelings. He could tell that this kid wasn't from a noble background and didn't receive much education, yet he tried hard to shape himself into a perfect gentleman, but very clumsily. There was a hint of formality in his every move and act, as if he was uncertain about which mask he should wear to associate with others.

In brief, he was putting on airs and doing imitations — of no specific targets.

Generally speaking, affected persons were always annoying even if they were only kids. But somehow Xueqing didn't find Cheng Qian nasty. Contrarily, he felt some compassion for him. So he explained in a mild tone, "Third Martial Uncle, I am only a servant with poor talents, and take charge of Sect Leader's and Martial Uncles' daily life. The art of charms is an extensive and profound learning of which I don't have a smattering. I've caught only a word or two from Sect Leader. Young master, you might as well go and ask Sect Leader or my... your First Senior Brother."

Cheng Qian caught the word "my" observantly. Thinking of Taoist children's over-intimate and under-respectful attitude towards the sect leader, his doubts grew even stronger.

Xueqing soon familiarized Cheng Qian with all the furnishings in the room. He hastily bathed him to wash off the travel weariness, changed his clothes, and tidied up the house inside and out. Then he led him out.

Cheng Qian fished for information about his first senior brother from Xueqing, while keeping up his demeanor at the same time. Finally, he learned that first senior brother's surname was Yan, and he was named Yan Zhengming, born in a rich family.

To what extent was his family rich? Cheng Qian wasn't very clear about it — he was a destitute child who didn't have a definite conception of richness. To his knowledge, the so-called “rich men” were hardly more than people of Squire Wang's kind. Wang married his third concubine at sixty. In Cheng Qian's opinion, he could count as a super wealthy man.

It was said when Yan Zhengming was seven years old, he ran away from home because of a trivial matter, and met their crafty... no, astute master who discovered Yan Zhengming's talent for cultivation.

With the aid of his facile tongue, the old charlatan inveigled young and unsophisticated Yan Zhengming into Fuyao Sect successfully, who later became the very first apprentice of Muchun.

The young master's disappearance naturally sank the Yans into great anxiety, they used all their strength and finally found Yan Zhengming who had gone astray — whether he was enticed by Muchun or he did so by choice, the young lord just wouldn't go home and insisted on staying and cultivating with his master as though he was possessed.

This young master had been spoiled from birth, his family certainly wouldn't watch their baby son suffer with a charlatan and do nothing. Nevertheless, with several disputes producing no results, they compromised at last. They provided finance for Fuyao Sect, and simply took it that they were keeping a theatrical troupe as their young master's entertainment.

There were various categories of cultivation sects in the world, among which real prestigious righteous sects and heterodox evil ones were very few, the rest were mostly "pheasant (unauthorized) sects".

Perhaps sects like Fuyao that were supported by a rich family and thus had a relatively decent existence, could roughly be called "poultry sects", Cheng Qian thought.

And so he understood, their first senior brother was not only their senior brother, but also the "financial backer of Fuyao sect" and the "very first apprentice", who thus occupied the highest position in the sect, and whom even his master had to curry favor with.

As for first senior brother himself — he was a sheer spendthrift as Cheng Qian could instantly see through.

He would have accounted for all the four words "lordly, luxury-loving, loose-living, and idle" perfectly but that he dared not to lead a loose life because he was only fifteen.

Young master Yan was combing his hair when Muchun Zhenren led his two neatly dressed apprentices to him — it wasn't that the sect leader lacked

courtesy and chose to bother first senior brother early in the morning before he groomed himself, but first senior brother simply would comb his hair many times a day.

Luckily he was still young, there was no fear of getting bald.

The servant that was entitled to comb first senior brother's hair must be a girl, who was neither too old nor too young and should have no defect in her beauty, no inelegance in her odor. She would do nothing other than comb hair and burn incense every day, so her hands must be soft and as white as jade without a disappointing callus.

Taoist children like Xueqing were originally domestic servants of the Yans'. They were well skimmed off and sent up to the mountain as factotums.

But the young lord didn't have any Taoist child around him. It was said that it was because he didn't like men very much for they were all fingers and thumbs. Instead, his courtyard was full of pretty personal maids, as if springtime was resident there.

Before entering the room, Cheng Qian gazed at his master's goatee secretly for a while, and he drew a conclusion: Master's goatee had been combed.

On the way here, Xueqing informed him that Muchun settled him at Qing'an Dwelling because he wanted Cheng Qian to purge his thoughts and calm his mind. He felt faintly awkward in a way because he hated to admit that he had a disturbed mind. Now looking up at the tablet inscribed "**Land**

of the Tender [1]” above the door, he breathed a sigh of relief — he wasn’t disturbed, but his master was so aged as to be muddled.

Han Yuan took ignorance as fun and asked childishly, “Master, what’s written on the tablet?”

Muchun read it to him stroking his mustache. “Does it mean to encourage Senior Brother to be tenderer?” Han Yuan asked again, staring at his master blankly.

Hearing that, Muchun went pale and warned, “You mustn’t have your first senior brother hear that!”

Seeing the honorable sect leader flinched like a stray dog with the tail between its legs, Cheng Qian and Han Yuan thought alike for the first time, “Outrageous! Total disregard for the order of seniority!”

Thinking so, they took a look at each other and saw the shock on the face. Thereupon they tucked their tails as their master did quickly and acquired the most important skill of Fuyao Sect — to keep a low profile.

As a matter of fact, Cheng Qian was overwhelmed by his first senior brother’s beauty at first sight.

Young though he was, he looked extremely seductive and was a rare beauty. He was wearing a snow-white satin robe embroidered with invisible patterns glittering to the changing of light. He leaned back in the carved

chair limply and rested his chin on his hand, eyelids dropping a little and hair hanging down loosely like splashed ink.

Hearing the footsteps, Yan Zhengming raised his eyelids indifferently. His canthi were slim and curled up like a stroke of light ink, radiating rays of haughtiness and effeminacy. Seeing his master, he showed no intention of standing up and sat still on the chair. Then he asked sluggishly, “Master, what did you bring back this time?”

He seemed to be a late developer compared with his peers, as he still sounded like a juvenile in an androgynous way, with the tone of a pampered kid.

But what was incredible was that there just appeared to be nothing strange in his androgyny.

Putting up a smile on his face and rubbing his hands, the sect leader introduced, “Well, this is your third junior brother, Cheng Qian. And this is your fourth junior brother, Han Yuan. Both are small and immature. From now on, as their first senior brother, you should take care of them for me.”

Hearing Han Yuan’s name, Han Zhengming seemed to twitch his eyebrows and cheeks slightly. He condescended to shoot a glance at his fourth junior brother from under half-closed lids, and then immediately looked away, as if his eyes were polluted.

“Han Yuan?” First senior brother commented slowly, seemingly dissatisfied, “You really lived up to your name and suffered an ugly look.”

Han Yuan had gone green around the gills.

Yan Zhengming left him aside and turned to Cheng Qian.

“That boy,” he said, “come over here.”

Notes:

[1] Land of the Tender: enthralling experience of enjoying tender female charms (sometimes used as the name of a brothel).

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Chapter 5

Yan Zhengming's attitude was impertinent. His gesture of beckoning Cheng Qian was like calling a dog.

His words and behaviors instantly brought Cheng Qian to himself from the amazement.

Cheng Qian had never been liked by others since birth. As a result, he fundamentally felt inferior. As time passed, the sense of inferiority seeped into his bones and transformed into intense self-esteem verging on paranoia. A simple look would be enough to arouse his hostility, much less such an offensive gesture.

Cheng Qian looked as if he'd had a bucket of cold water poured over him in a severe winter. With no expression on his frozen face, he moved forward and evaded Yan Zhengming's outstretched hand, then he routinely bowed to him in salute saying, "First Senior Brother."

Yan Zhengming craned to have a good look at him. With his move, a whiff of perfume of orchids, which was strong enough to expel worms, enveloped Cheng Qian. God knows how many times he had scented his clothes.

But this young master was seemingly bad at reading other's face, at least he didn't take note that Cheng Qian was on the edge of an eruption of anger.

He even leisurely sized Cheng Qian up as if he was examining the goods. He probably reckoned Cheng Qian to be passably pleasing to the eye, as he

nodded negligently and expressed his sincere hope for his junior brother regardless of others' reactions.

“Not bad. Hope time will not ruin your face.” He said bluntly.

With that, to display the due amiability of first senior brother, the young master stretched himself to brush his palm over Cheng Qian's head and took it as a friendly pat. Then he instructed perfunctorily, “Now I have seen the ‘Grievance’ and ‘Injustice’ (make fun of Han Yuan's name), Master, you can lead them off — um, Yu-er [1](a maid), give some pine-nut candies to him... each of them.”

Muchun Zhenren's face twitched a bit. He suddenly had a strange feeling that the two kids he brought was not the unworthy apprentice's junior brothers but rather his maids.

... and maids whose appearances weren't very pleasing.

Pine-nut candies were not common candies. They were kept in a small exquisite sachet with every one being plump. There was a glittering and translucent frosting on the surface, giving off an ineffable refreshing fragrance.

In reality, poor children would hardly get the chance to eat such exquisite snacks. But Cheng Qian showed no interest. No sooner had he walked out of the room than he thrust the sachet into Han Yuan's hand. “This is for Junior Brother.” He said offhandedly.

Han Yuan was dumbfounded by his “generosity”. Embarrassed, he took it with mixed feelings.

In the world where people like him were all struggling for survival like stray dogs, the little beggar had been accustomed to scrambling for food all the time. Who would have the energy to care for others?

Han Yuan felt a momentary warmth in the heart and got a big, crazy misunderstanding simultaneously — maybe his little senior brother wasn’t weak or vulnerable at all. Instead, he was really magnanimous and treated him sincerely.

Muchun Zhenren wasn’t easily fooled. He clearly saw Cheng Qian clap his hands with antipathy as if he had touched something dirty. He understood at once that Cheng Qian’s giving away his candies was not an act of modesty but because he was purely disinclined to show respect for his monster-like first senior brother.

But by the way, the strongest temptation a kid at his age could face was no more than food and drinks, Cheng Qian actually resisted that without even a look.

Muchun Zhenren thought with a tinge of emotion, “This brat is too hard-hearted. He is doomed to be a demon if he fails to be a hero.”

As thus, little bastard Cheng Qian was formally admitted into Fuyao Sect.

He had a dreamless sleep in Qing'an Dwelling for the first night until a quarter to four the next day, having no trouble sleeping in a new place and no nostalgia for home.

The next morning, Xueqing changed his clothes into a robe and combed a knot out of his hair, dressing him up smartly.

Normally, kids under twenty didn't need to bind up their hair and wear caps. But according to Xueqing, he was no longer an ordinary kid since he was now in an immortal sect.

The biggest distinction between poultry sects and pheasant ones was that pheasant sects were entirely mucking about, while poultry sects apparently had considerable resources even though their historical sources were not quite clear.

For example, the talismans. Priceless talismans in legends were almost everywhere, even trees and stones were carved with charms. Pointing at the charms on the root of a tree, Xueqing said to Cheng Qian, "If Third Martial Uncle gets lost in the mountain, just ask these stones and trees."

Xueqing came forward to do a demonstration. He whispered to the root, "To 'Unknown Hall' — Unknown Hall is Sect Leader's residence. Martial Uncle, today you should go there and receive a lecture to be initiated into the sect."

Cheng Qian forgot to reply, because he was caught up in the spectacular scene that the root was giving off faint fluorescence.

The sky just got light but the sun was yet to come up. Luminous spots as shiny as moonlight clustered together and decorated the dark, suffusing the forest with some magical auras. These tiny spots floated through the air and attached themselves to other stones and trees, and finally twisted into a gleaming pathway through the woods.

Although this wasn't the first magic tool Cheng Qian had seen, it was the first useful one!

Xueqing was a good mind reader. He knew this kid was odd-natured and willful, so seeing he was fascinated, Xueqing didn't point it out straightforward and waited until he recovered. Then he reminded collectedly, "Third Martial Uncle, this way, please. Follow the light."

Only when he was walking on the path paved with fluorescence, did Cheng Qian start to feel that he was turning into another kind of person and was going to lead another kind of life.

"Brother Xueqing, who made these?" Asked Cheng Qian.

Xueqing failed to correct Cheng Qian's form of address, so he just let him be. Hearing the question, he answered, "Sect Leader."

Cheng Qian was shocked again, he found it hard to believe.

Not long ago, in Cheng Qian's eyes, his master was still a funny long-neck pheasant that was neither attractive nor useful — could it be possible that he was actually not a swindler?

Could he have any uncanny powers?

Was Master invincible and able to control the forces of nature?

Cheng Qian imagined that with sort of disbelief, but found it remained difficult for him to generate real awe of his master.

Following the gleaming pathway, Xueqing led Cheng Qian to the Unknown Hall.

In fact, “Unknown Hall” was a small thatched cottage, with no magic tools and no tablet above the door. There was a palm-sized plate at the entrance, though, crudely carved with a beast head, which Cheng Qian found vaguely familiar, but the name just escaped him for the moment. Next to the beast head was a line of characters, it read “not know a thing”.

The cottage suddenly gave Cheng a false impression that he was back at his home in the countryside, for it was too modest with nearly nothing.

There was a lonely yard in front of the door; a table with three legs was set there and a stone was placed where the fourth leg should be. Cracks appeared everywhere on the tabletop. Muchun Zhenren sat bolt upright behind the table, staring at a saucer attentively.

The saucer was a roughly made pottery, whose shape was between round and square and the bottom was uneven. Several rusty copper coins were scattered on it, they together created an indescribable eerie atmosphere.

Cheng Qian paused in spite of himself, for a split second, he felt the master staring at the coins was quite awe-inspiring.

“What does Sect Leader detect from the Divinatory Trigrams today?”
Xueqing smiled.

Hearing that, the sect leader put away the copper coins solemnly. Tucking his hands into sleeves, he said slowly, “Tao of Heaven implies, chicken stewed with mushrooms should be on today’s menu.”

When he said that, he stuck up his mustache a bit, rolled his eyes and sniffed slightly, expressing his true pulse of craving.

The instant Cheng Qian saw his expression, he found it familiar. Then he suddenly connected it with the plate at the entrance and the conclusion came to his mind — the beast head on the plate was a weasel!

Ignorant countrymen knew nothing about oracles, much less Buddhist and Taoist scriptures. Even the gods they pray to were totally fake, and hence unorthodox “immortals” like “Immortal Yellow” and “Immortal Green” had wormed their way into orthodox ones, and became household names.

“Immortal Yellow” referred to weasel spirits, and “Immortal Green” referred to snake spirits, which was also called “House-Protecting Snake”. It was said that enshrining the two immortals could protect one’s house and keep his family safe and sound.

Cheng Qian had seen a memorial tablet set up for Immortal Yellow in his village, there was just such a beast head on it.

Come to think of this and take a look at Muchun, he saw that he was scrawny with a small head, a lantern jaw, a long waist and short legs... he looked like a weasel spirit in every aspect.

With such inexpressible doubts and complicated emotions, Cheng Qian stepped forward and saluted to his master who was suspected to be a weasel spirit.

His master gestured at him and chuckled, "Don't stand on ceremony, that's pedantic. Fuyao Sect doesn't have such etiquettes."

"What do you have then? Chicken stewed with mushrooms?" Cheng Qian thought bitingly.

At the very moment, Han Yan's shouting penetrated through the air into their ears, "Master! Senior Brother!"

He practiced what his master had only just preached, exclaiming right after he entered the room, "My God! What a shabby house!"

Then he walked around the yard with the familiarity of a house owner, and stopped right before Cheng Qian.

The little beggar with no long-term vision had been bought off with a sachet of candies. Now he firmly believed that Cheng Qian was genuinely good to him, and thus he stopped calling him "Senior Brother" enigmatically. He

came up to pull Cheng Qian's sleeves intimately, "**Xiao-Qian** [1], why didn't you come to play with me yesterday?"

Cheng Qian got annoyed on seeing him. He took a half step backwards quietly and withdrew his sleeves from his grasp, then he said stiffly, "Fourth Junior Brother."

Xueqing dressed Cheng Qian up as an adult. So he looked elegant and fine like a man made of jade, with his smooth forehead and slender eyebrows exposed. Supposing a man was made of jade, his solitariness would be forgivable.

Han Yuan himself was a beggar without parents and cultivation. He was simple-minded — if he couldn't bear the sight of someone, he would never possibly like him; while if he bought into the belief that someone a nice person, he would treat him well in turn — now for him, Cheng Qian was exactly the later. So he didn't take offense at Cheng Qian's indifference in the slightest, and he thought delightedly, "Unlike us that had a vagrant life, domesticated kids are shy; I have to look after him in future." Although that was only his one-sided thinking.

Muchun Zhenren's eyes were small but very piercing. He stood aloof and looked on with indifference for a moment, but he finally couldn't help interrupting Han Yuan's acting cheap, "Xiao-Yuan, come here."

Han Yuan walked to the shaky table cheerfully, "Master, what do you want me for?"

Looking him up and down, Muchun Zhenren said solemnly, “You’re older than your third senior brother, although you’re admitted into our sect later. So I have to admonish you first.”

Weasel-like Master was ultimately Master. As he rarely adopted a stern countenance, Han Yuan straightened up his back involuntarily.

“You have an active disposition; frivolity is your weakness.” Said Muchun, “I shall grant you ‘Solid Rock’ as your precept, which warns that you should avoid opportunism, vanity and distraction; which reminds you to focus your thoughts and not to slack off in any case. Understand?”

Han Yuan lifted his head and wiped his runny nose. “Ah?” he uttered fuzzily — he didn’t understand a single word of the preach.

Fortunately, Muchun paid no attention to his impoliteness. He turned to Cheng Qian after finishing his words.

Only then did Cheng Qian find out that his master wasn’t born with a pair of bird eyes, but his eyelids folded inward slightly. In addition, his eyes were normally half closed and therefore looked as if they were roving. Now he opened his limpid eyes, revealing the contrast of black and white. His expression suddenly became very grave.

Notes:

[1] -er: added to nouns to indicate littleness, intimacy, etc.

[2] Xiao-: used before either surname or given name as a form of endearing address. Similar to “-chan” in Japanese.

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Chapter 6

“Cheng Qian.”

Cheng Qian wasn't sure why, but his master always called Han Yuan “Xiao-Yuan”, while he called Cheng Qian by full name. He couldn't tell whether his master favored him or not from his voice, but there was stress in each syllable.

Bewildered, Cheng Qian lifted his head, and folded his hands in sleeves into fists.

“Come.” Muchun Zhenren looked him up and down. Presently he seemed to realize he was too smileless. He dropped his eyelids a bit and turned back to the benign weasel. Then he said with his voice softening a little, “Come here.”

As he spoke, he raised his hand onto Cheng Qian's head. The faint temperature of his palm and the incense of wood gradually permeated Cheng Qian's body.

That didn't help as a comfort, however. Cheng Qian remained in a fluster.

He was running his master's comments on Han Yuan in his head and thinking anxiously, “What will Master say about me?”

In a fleeting moment, memories of Cheng Qian's equally fleeting life flashed through his head. He tried to pick out his own shortcomings before

his master, and get prepared for the coming preach.

He started reflecting in his heart, “Will he say I’m narrow-minded? Or unkind? Unfriendly?”

However, Muchun Zhenren didn’t point out his shortcomings as he did in Han Yuan’s case. The sect leader even hesitated for some time, as if he was having difficulty finding the appropriate wording.

Cheng Qian waited anxiously an unconscionable time until Muchun said solemnly, word by word for emphasis, “As for you, you know it well in your heart. So I’ll come straight to the point, I shall grant you ‘Free and Easy’ as your precept.”

The preach was so simple as to be vague and hard to comprehend right away. Cheng Qian frowned, all his mental preparations came to naught at last. But his tension didn’t ease, and conversely, strengthened.

“Master, what’s ‘Free and Easy’?” Cheng Qian blurted out.

But soon he regretted that he had asked, for he didn’t want to appear as stupid as Han Yuan.

Cheng Qian pulled himself together. With a little diffidence, he struggled to work out a far-fetched explanation and asked in a probing tone, “Does it mean to urge me to clear my distracting thoughts and focus on cultivation?”

After a pause, instead of giving a specific explanation, Muchun nodded and said vaguely, “For now... you could say so.”

For now? What about in the future?

And what was “you could say so”?

Hearing the answer, Cheng Qian was even more at a loss. He even scented a ghost of uncertain future from Muchun Zhenren’s words. And he could also tell that his master had no intention of going into details. Due to his tactfulness from precocity, he barely swallowed his doubts and made a formal bow to Muchun, saying “Yes, Master. Thanks for your edification.”

Muchun Zhenren sighed noiselessly. Though he looked like a man in the prime of his life, he was actually so old as to have very rich experience. And of course he could see things — even though Cheng Qian behaved with so good manners that he even called the Taoist child who took care of his living “Brother”, yet evidently it wasn’t because he reckoned others to be respectful, but he refused to damage the redundant “refinements” in front of “OTHERS”.

As the proverb goes, *“Propriety is the attenuated form of leal-heartedness and good faith, and is also the commencement of disorder”*. Even if this kid had great insight and exceptional talents, his nature was poles apart Great Tao. And moreover, Cheng Qian dwelled on things too much to be pleasing to others... although in view of his haughtiness, assumedly he didn’t care to be pleasing in the slightest.

Muchun took his hand off Cheng Qian’s head, with the worry that he might go astray someday.

He overturned the three-legged table and called Han Yuan and Cheng Qian over.

The reverse side of the wooden table was bestrewn with thousands of worm-eaten holes, and to their surprise, between the gaps of these holes were inscribed thickly dotted characters.

“This is what I am gonna teach you at your initiation — the rules of Fuyao Sect. You two must memorize them word for word, and from today on, write them down from memory once a day, for a total of forty-nine days.” Said Muchun.

In face of so many rules, Cheng Qian finally revealed moderate astonishment — he never felt it was proper to inscribe so sacred sect rules on the back of a rotten table.

...let alone a three-legged wooden table.

Han Yuan was in the identical astonishment with him.

The little beggar craned his neck and turned pale in shock. “My goodness, what the hell are these? Master, these characters may know me, but I definitely don’t know them!” He shouted.

Cheng Qian, “...”

A master who was likely a weasel spirit, a preach that didn’t make sense, a set of rules that was inscribed on the back of a rotten table, and a senior brother who was effeminate, as well as a beggar junior brother who was

illiterate... what good results could Cheng Qian expect when the starting point of his cultivation career was so extraordinary?

Cheng Qian predicted a bleak future.

But when he returned to his dwelling in the evening, his spirits lifted at the knowledge that he actually had a study. There was not only an immense number of books but also paper and writing brushes prepared by Xueqing.

Cheng Qian had never written on paper — add his natural parents' learning up and they couldn't necessarily write from one to ten. And naturally there wasn't any stationary in their house. These years, by virtue of his photographic memory, he had learned quite a few characters from the old Tongsheng secretly. He stored them in his brain and practiced by writing with a stick on the ground. He had been dreaming of having the four treasures of the study (i.e. writing brush, ink stick, ink slab, paper).

Cheng Qian got addicted to writing, so he didn't follow his master's instruction — his master only required him to write the rules once a day. Whereas he was already writing the fifth when Xueqing came to ask him to have dinner. And he showed no sign of stopping.

The writing brush made from weasel hair was totally different from sticks. As it was Cheng Qian's first time to use a brush and paper, the characters he wrote were naturally intolerable to the eye. But it could be seen that he was intentionally imitating the handwriting of the rules carved on the table — in addition to the rules themselves, he even committed every stroke of those characters to memory.

Xueqing discovered that every time Cheng Qian wrote, he was improving what he failed to write well last time. He was so absorbed that he sat there for more than half an hour without taking a break. He even didn't notice Xueqing enter the room.

While Cheng Qian had a good sleep the first night, he was too excited to fall asleep this evening. As long as he closed his eyes, the soreness from his wrist would attack, and those characters and strokes would jam his mind.

The sect rules must be written by the same person as the tablet of Qing'an Dwelling. So much did Cheng Qian love his handwriting that he kept tossing and turning restlessly in bed. The tablet apart, the shabby wooden table looked as if it was going to break in a few years. From this, Cheng Qian deduced that it hadn't been long since the sect rules was inscribed.

Whose handwriting could it be? Master's?

He turned the problem over in his mind until sleepiness struck. In unconsciousness, something seemed to show him around Fuyao Mountain, and led him to Unknown Hall. Baffled, Cheng Qian thought to himself, "What do I come to Master's dwelling for?"

But he walked in anyway and saw a person in the yard.

The person was very tall and was supposed to be a man, whose facial features were unusually blurred, like covered under a black haze. His hands were terribly pasty, the bones of which were strongly defined. He was like a wandering ghost.

Cheng Qian was terrified. He took two steps backward subconsciously. But then he felt concerned about his master, so he emboldened himself to ask, “Who are you? Why are you in my master’s yard?”

With the lift of the man’s hand, Cheng Qian felt strong attraction, which suspended him in the air and pulled him over to the man in a wink.

That man raised his hand to touch Cheng Qian’s face.

Cheng Qian gave a start of coldness. The man’s hand was so freezing that a mere touch chilled Cheng Qian to the marrow of his bones.

“Little creature, you’ve got guts.” The man seized Cheng Qian’s shoulder and chuckled, “Go back!”

Thereupon, Cheng Qian felt a heavy push and jerked awake on his bed, the dawn yet to break.

The dream dispelled all thoughts of sleep. So he tidied himself up and killed time by watering flowers in the yard, which made Xueqing deeply ashamed that he got up later than Cheng Qian until he guided him to Mission Hall.

Mission Hall was a small pavilion in the midst of a clearing, where there were a few tables and chairs. Although Cheng Qian and Xueqing arrived very early, there were already Taoist children. They had swept the floor and boiled water, and was preparing to make tea.

Cheng Qian found a place to sit down silently, and a well-trained Taoist child served a cup of tea forthwith.

Cheng Qian remained a cool face all the time, but he only sat at the edge of the seat cautiously — habit became second nature. Once he learned to suffer hardships, he couldn't get used to living in comfort. He felt embarrassing fidgets, watching others working while himself drinking tea.

After the time it took to have a cup of tea, Cheng Qian heard footsteps. He looked up and saw a strange young man walking up along the alley next to the pavilion.

The youngster was dressed in a navy robe. He held a wooden sword in his arms and walked quickly, eyes fixed steadily forward. While his Taoist child had to run after him awkwardly.

“That's Second Martial Uncle.” Xueqing whispered to Cheng Qian.

Second Senior Brother, Li Yun. Cheng Qian had seen his name on the board behind the wicker door of Unknown Hall. So he hurriedly stood up to welcome him. “Second Senior Brother.”

Li Yuan didn't expect that someone came ahead of him. Hearing the voice, he paused, raised his head and shoot a glance at Cheng Qian. His black eyeballs seemed somewhat larger than normal, and thus his look appeared cold and not very genial.

Li Yun took a quick look at Cheng Qian. Then he abruptly forced a smile, which looked malicious, and said, “I've heard Master brought back two junior brothers, is that you?”

Cheng Qian didn't like Li Yun's look instinctively. He felt it was like something ominous. So he replied simply, "It's me and Fourth Junior Brother, Han Yuan."

Li Yun took one step forward and pressed near to him, asking interestedly, "What's your name?"

He was like an experienced wolf that spotted a rabbit. Cheng Qian nearly recoiled, but he didn't. He stood bolt upright in place and answered deadpan, "Cheng Qian."

"Oh, Xiao-Qian." Li Yun nodded and said with a hypocritical smile, "Nice to meet you."

All Cheng Qian could see was his creepy teeth. And he confirmed, as of now, there wasn't a second person in Fuyao Sect that he liked apart from his master.

Nevertheless, his master wasn't necessarily a PERSON.

After another while, Han Yuan and his master arrived. Han Yuan naturally sat in front of Cheng Qian and started complaining that Cheng Qian didn't play with him, and in the meantime, had a taste of all the snacks on the table.

Han Yuan sometimes smiled at his master flatteringly, and sometimes turned around to wink and frown at Cheng Qian, busy but orderly. He perfectly interpreted the saying "*Ugly people make more mischief*".

As to their first senior brother, Yan Zhengming, he was late for a full half hour. Then he came yawning.

Absolutely, he would never possibly come on foot — he came in chair, as a matter of fact. He asked two Taoist children to carry the cane chair all the way here from Land of the Tender.

A good-looking maid taking quick short steps fanned him from behind. And another Taoist child next to him was holding up a sunshade.

Yan Zhengming's robe was fluttering in the wind and his hems were like clouds in the sky. In an exaggerated manner, the young master arrived.

It looked as though he wasn't here for morning classes, he came to stir up trouble.

Upon entering the Mission Hall, first senior brother glanced sideways at Li Yun arrogantly, his eyebrows showing off disgust. Then he took a sweeping look at Han Yuan and the unfinished cakes on the table, after which he swished his folding fan open and covered up his eyes, in case his pure eyes were stained.

In the end, he had no choice but to walk to Cheng Qian's side angrily. The Taoist child around promptly wiped the stone stool four times, then laid a cushion on it and brewed a cup of tea. Next, he put the hot tea onto a saucer with charms. Magically, the saucer cooled the eat which had just been steaming so soon that the cup was covered with a layer of moisture. Only then did Yan Zhengming take a sip reluctantly.

With all the procedures done, Young Master Yan finally took a seat.

While Li Yun was inured to the scene and regarded Yan Zhengming as air, Han Yuan was stunned. His expression looked like that he was exclaiming “what the f**k”.

Having watched the whole process closely, even Cheng Qian, who had always been sarcastic, felt speechless at this point.

Thus began the chaotic morning class of Fuyao Sect, in Muchun’s four apprentices’ loathing for each other.

Yan Zhengming probably showed up like this:



Chapter 7

Maybe their master's bumpy saucer and rusty coins were really useful and he somehow foresaw this scene, as he looked well prepared.

With eyelids drooping, Muchun Zhenren stepped up to the podium, ignoring the undercurrent among his naughty apprentices. He said sluggishly, "For today's morning class, I want you to read *Scriptures on Clarity and Stillness* after me."

Scriptures on Clarity and Stillness here wasn't the same thing as *Wondrous Scripture of Constant Clarity and Stillness, as Spoken by the Most High Lord Lao*. It was only a piece of rambling repetitive talk, which was, in all probability, fabricated by the master himself, as its content was largely unintelligible.

Probably to show clarity and tranquility distinctly, Muchun Zhenren prolonged each character into two as he read. His drawl almost suffocated him, resulting in a striking vibrato in the last syllable of every sentence, which made him sound like an insane **laodan** [1] with a puckered mouth.

Cheng Qian listened for a moment and his ears began ringing — so loudly that he had his heart in his mouth, he was afraid that his master was meant to murder him.

Eventually, their master finished reading, gasping. He leisurely sipped from the teacup in front of him to soothe his throat. Cheng Qian hastily flapped the goose pimples off his body, and was waiting expectantly for his master's

brilliant remarks on charms and magic when he hopelessly heard his master's nauseating drawling voice again. "Okay, let's read once again."

Cheng Qian: "..."

Cheng Qian felt an impolite pat on his shoulder. His showy but useless first senior brother accosted him initiatively.

"Hey, kid." Said first senior brother. "Budge over."

First senior brother was the most precious treasure of Fuyao Sect. If he asked, Cheng Qian dared not go against him.

Young master Yan lifted his eyelids, and Taoist children around him moved over a bamboo **Beauty Chair** [2] right away without prodding. He reclined on it and openly closed his eyes in his master's presence, then started napping in the thundering sound of "stillness".

After observing for a while, Cheng Qian discovered some strong points of his monster-like first senior brother — he didn't snore when sleeping, for example.

Perhaps other people had been used to this. When first senior brother was having a brazen doze, second senior brother had mixed with his little junior brother in a short time, and simultaneously, didn't give up co-opting Cheng Qian, for he kept winking and frowning at him.

Of the four apprentices present, only Cheng Qian was relatively lenient towards their master. His lenience and harshness were always clearly

demarcated, but they were both faithful and meticulous. In the chaotic mess, only Cheng Qian sat motionlessly like a mountain and finished the “routine morning reading” with his master, so that the morning class didn’t become his master’s monologue.

Seeing that Cheng Qian didn’t even bother to acknowledge him, Li Yun rolled his eyes and came up with an idea. He shipped a small porcelain bottle out of his sleeve and shook it before Han Yuan. He murmured, “Do you know what this is?”

Directly Han Yuan took it over and opened it, a horrible stink washed over him and made him light-headed. Even Cheng Qian sitting behind him was unluckily involved.

“This is magic water, Golden Toad Liquid. I made it myself.” Li Yun said smugly.

“Isn’t it water that bathed toads’ feet?” Cheng Qian snorted.

Han Yuan covered his nose with his fingers and gave back the alleged “magic water”. Enduring the stink, he asked, “What’s it for?”

Li Yun smirked and crunched the rice paper on his desk into a ball. Then he dripped a few drops of magic water on it. As the water seeped into the paper speedily, the paper ball turned into a live toad in the blink of an eye.

There were various beasts and birds all over the world, why did he only pick out toads to play with? What a weird and sickening interest!

Cheng Qian was starting to understand why first senior brother looked at second senior brother as if looking at a shit.

Li Yun looked up and met Cheng Qian's eyes. Grinning, he poked the toad with his pen and said pointing at Cheng Qian, "Go after him."

The toad croaked and ran towards Cheng Qian. But it was nipped by a skinny hand midway — their master sneaked close to them unnoticed. The toad turned back to a normal paper ball in his hand.

"Heretical tricks." Muchun Zhenren sighed as if chanting. "You've got a real talent, Xiao-Yun."

Li Yun stuck out his tongue at him.

"If so, now you lead your junior brothers to read." Said his master.

Li Yun had no option but to force a eunuch's voice and spent approximately an hour reading the small paragraph of *Scriptures on Clarity and Stillness* repeatedly for at least a dozen times, until his master eventually showed mercy by calling for a halt and put the endless torment into an end.

"I am gonna pee if he goes on reading." Han Yuan whispered to Cheng Qian, shivering.

Cheng Qian sat stiffly, pretending not to be acquainted with him.

Having sat in repose for over an hour, their master looked radiant. He said, "Quiet reading should go with active motion. All of you, get out with me —

oh, Cheng Qian, wake your first senior brother up.”

Cheng Qian didn't anticipate such a misfortune would fall upon him. He turned aside and looked at the youth in white. Then he steeled himself to reach out a finger and poked him on the shoulder like touching a flame. He thought with his heart in his boots, “It's Master that asked me to wake you up, don't take your anger out on me.”

First senior brother seemed to have a sweet sleep, as he didn't get angry. He opened his eyes that was blurred with sleep, and stared at Cheng Qian for quite a while, then he took a deep breath and crawled out of the chair. He feebly waved his hand and said, “Got it... you can go first.”

Half-awake young master Yan appeared to have a better temper. His peach-blossom (amorous) eyes were misting and his gaze at Cheng Qian thus softened a lot.

Afterwards, Yan Zhengming asked with a gentle expression, “Oh, one more thing, what's your name again?”

“... Cheng Qian.”

“Oh.” Yan Zhengming nodded indifferently. Compared with his undisguised disgust for Li Yun and his behavior of covering up his face before Han Yuan, His attitude towards Cheng Qian was reasonably polite.

With that “Oh”, Yan Zhengming paid no more attention to Cheng Qian. He covered his yawn with a hand and sat still in place, waiting for his maid,

Yu-er, to comb his hair.

Cheng Qian once suspected that his coquettish first senior brother was in effect a pheasant spirit with a colorful tail. But seeing the scene, he cast off the speculation — at this rate, even a real pheasant would inevitably become a tailless two-feet monster someday.

First senior brother still had a thick hair. This illustrated that he was only possibly some kind of more unthinkable animal.

In the yard, a Taoist child came over and presented a wooden sword to Muchun with both hands.

Cheng Qian and Han Yuan brightened into alert attention at once. They grew up hearing stories where immortals treaded on thin air and traveled on flying swords. Despite the fact that Cheng Qian was the victim of the saints' books, he was essentially a little boy. There was a yearning for legendary powers to summon wind and call for rain in the cockles of his heart, however he denied that.

The wooden sword had an ancient simplicity, oozing some kind of historical heaviness. In boys' world, bizarre alchemy, profound scriptures, the feat to learn one's previous incarnation and prophesy his life beyond through stargazing, and even the ability to make powerful talismans... none of them could bear the comparison with the term "travel on flying swords" in terms of attractiveness.

What was going through the Heavenly Tribulation and ascending to immortality, compared with flying swords?

Even the magnificent feat of mounting the clouds and riding the mist would give its way to legends where the piercing chilliness could sweep across fourteen continents with the arc of a sword.

Muchun Zhenren moved his fragile arms and legs, and walked slowly to the center of the yard. He was as thin as a pole hung with clothes.

Full of expectations, Han Yuan asked what Cheng Qian felt embarrassed to ask. “Master, are you going to teach us how to use swords? When can we wield a sword?”

Muchun: “Don’t worry, I’ve got wooden swords for you.”

With that, under the public expectation, he flapped his arms and made an opening move infirmly. Then he started demonstrating every posture and movement, and at the same time, he muttered, “Fuyao — Wooden Swordplay — build your body — circulate Qi (Vital Energy) — stimulate blood flow — live to — immortality.”

Cheng Qian: “...”

His embryonic dream of controlling natural forces shattered in the “glint and flash of swords”.

Master’s “brilliant” swordplay soon attracted a sparrow to perch on the wooden stake beside him and look.

This was definitely the quietest swordplay in the world. The sword was too forceless to disturb the air a bit. Even a snail could climb up to the top of a tree during the time for the sword to sweep around.

Combined with their master's enigmatic commentary, the effect was "impressive".

With a stride, Muchun turned around, bent over and stretched out the sword in a sidelong way. Then he tottered to the sparrow on the stake.

The little sparrow was exceedingly audacious. He gazed at the approaching sword, his black bean-like eyes wide open.

Muchun warned unblushingly, "Little sparrow, mind out of the way or my sword will kill you!"

In actuality, his sword didn't reach the sparrow's feet until he finished long-winded sentence. Hearing the "ferocious" warning, the little sparrow lifted a foot in no hurry and stepped forward, exactly over the "sharp sword", then watched the gentle sword image fade away.

Han Yuan had been rolling in the aisles. Cheng Qian also found it ridiculous — the martial arts that a street performer in his village practiced wasn't so hilarious as the wooden sword. But he didn't burst into laughter, for he found senior brothers didn't — first senior brother was understandable as he was combing hair and it was inconvenient for him to bend double with laughter, while the toad-aholic second senior brother had certain reference value.

Just now Li Yun was like sitting on a bed of nails, but now, his face, which always appeared malicious, betrayed some attentiveness. His eyes were glued to his master, who was like a lama dancing to exorcise demons.

Their master performed the full set of the first form of Fuyao Wooden Sword, and ended with a posture as a roc standing on one foot. He stretched out his arms in line, held the sword and craned his neck as if he was gazing into distance. He stood unsteadily and said, “This is the first form of Fuyao Wooden Sword, **the Roc’s Long Flight** [3]!”

However, he didn’t look like a roc spreading his wings but was rather like a rooster crowing.

Han Yuan covered up his mouth, his simmered laughter reddened his face.

His master didn’t tolerate him this time. He hit Han Yuan’s head with the wooden sword — his move was yet much neater than just now.

“What did I tell you? Focus your thoughts! Don’t be frivolous!” Muchun Zhenren rapped. “What are you laughing at, huh? Unreasonable! Make five copies of *Scriptures on Clarity and Stillness* and hand it to me tomorrow.”

As Han Yuan didn’t know how to read, his copying the sect rules had been delayed. Hearing the sharp rebuke, he immediately adopted his last resort and said shamelessly, “Master, I can’t read yet.”

“Make rubbings and imitate the script — Li Yun!”

Second senior brother advanced.

“You take junior brothers to practice the opening move and first form. And I’ll give you guidance on second form later.”

“I’ve heard It’s been over a year since he was initiated, but he is only at the stage of second form. Did he spend the year practicing crowing like a cock?” Cheng Qian thought.

As he was surprised, Li Yun already stood stiffly, straightened his face and took up the wooden sword, then he performed a neat opening move, which surprisingly revealed the vigorous ambition of a young lad. His half-dead middle-aged master wasn’t remotely comparable to this vital youngster. This young man was named after green bamboos, and his posture was also like elegant bamboos. His sword emitted swooshes as it cleaved through the air, and the winds from the sword were fairly aggressive with great force.

That was the spirit of youth. Invincible spirit!

The little sparrow that was imperturbable just now panicked. He flapped his wings and spurted into the sky.

Before Cheng Qian and Han Yuan brought themselves back to earth, their second senior brother shouted loudly with a stern face, “Fuyao Wooden Swordplay! Build your body! Circulate Qi and stimulate blood flow! Live to immortality!”

... the youth swordsman turned into a power pill seller in an instant.

However, Li Yun didn't feel an ounce of shame. Finishing the words, he even turned around and grimaced at his stunned junior brothers.

Notes:

[1] laodan: old female role in Chinese opera.

[2] Beauty Chair: a kind of Chinese traditional bench with lazy back which wins its name for being sat by beauties and leaned along their waist.

[3] the roc's long flight: a roc can reach a destination of a myriad miles away at one jump — (said of those who) have bright future.

Chapter 8

Yan Zhengming polished his wooden sword with a silk handkerchief deliberately, while watching his junior brothers practicing swordplay.

Junior brothers' swordplay was literally a joke to him. Except that Li Yun's was presentable, the other two were basically having fun with the wooden swords, just like big apes playing two rods. But their master was still correcting their gestures of holding a sword.

One moment he said to this one, "Wooden swords don't hurt, but real swords and sabers do. To deal with weapons, you can't be too careful — Cheng Qian, don't push your finger against the blade. The nerves of your fingers are linked with your heart, can't you really feel that pain?"

Next he turned to another. "There is a saber weighing three hundred **Jin** [1] in East Sea, which you hold with both hands. But this is a sword, Xiao-Yuan. I suppose you are not practicing swordplay, but rather forging iron."

And sometimes he would have to roll up his sleeves and run about to stop Li Yun's making trouble. "Knock it off! Hey, mind your sword! You're poking your eye."

... To say "unbearable to the eye" was to praise these brats.

Young master Yan looked around and laid his eyes on Cheng Qian, taking a few more looks at the kid.

He was well aware that he was a man-about-town, still he deemed it appropriate as he didn't perform any inhuman acts, and his behaviors hindered nobody. So he felt no qualms of conscience and never repented. He even intensified in accordance with timing and mood.

In addition, young master Yan also acknowledged he was somewhat shallow — he had a clear estimation of himself that he was hugely short of both acquirements and moral qualities. Such being the case, he wasn't in a position to demand them from others. Consequently, the only way he had left to differentiate his likes from dislikes was to judge by appearance.

According to this standard, people of Han Yuan's kind were unpardonably evil in his eyes.

“Judging by appearance” was Yan Zhengming's iron-forged principle. However, he had made exceptions for two: one was his master, the other was Li Yun.

Even though his master looked as though he was replete with vices, young master Yan was willing to excuse that. After all, he had been cultivating with him for eight years; he was, as it were, spoiled by his master, and was emotionally close to him.

As for Li Yun... however sightly he was, Yan Zhengming was absolutely irreconcilable with him — that guy was a bloody nuisance!

In the case of Cheng Qian, Yan Zhengming was, in actual fact, fairly fond of him. Otherwise he wouldn't have given him candies upon meeting him

— something seldom happened as the cycas blossoms — the pity was that his third junior brother didn't appreciate his kindness.

While junior brothers were running around making a racket, Yan Zhengming just stood there absently, idly carrying his wooden sword. He was mulling over the standstill of his sword skills.

It was eight years since Yan Zhengming began learning swordsmanship from his master. But he barely made it to the third form.

Although the opening move his master performed was like Five-Animal Exercises (aerobics) aimed for the middle-aged and elderly, there was no absurdity in the sword art itself.

Unlike the nescient little beggar Han Yuan, before Yan Zhengming was initiated into Fuyao Sect, his parents had employed the best professional to teach him swordsmanship. Even if he wasn't skillful, he wasn't blind either.

The Fuyao Wooden Swordplay had five forms in total, namely, "the Roc's Long Flight", "Seek and Pursue", "Backfire", "Decline from Prosperity", "Return to Trueness", with twenty-five moves for each, producing countless variations. As his age increased, Yan Zhengming often had an illusion that this set of sword art was all-embracing. To pause and reflect, he found from every point derived infinite possibilities.

But his master never shed light on them. He'd only demonstrate the basic moves, and all enlightenment came with Yan Zhengming's own efforts and digestion.

Yan Zhengming had made several attempts to ask his master why he wouldn't go into particulars about these ingenious moves, only to let him get away by playing the fool.

Yan Zhengming pondered for a while. Then he stood up to go through the third form, "Backfire".

It was inglorious and embarrassing to say that he had been stuck in the form for a good two years, even if he wasn't a pursuer of literary or military accomplishments, and was merely an indolent teenager.

The name "Backfire" was honestly apropos. However many times Yan Zhengming had rectified his moves, he failed to figure out where the rub was and couldn't shake off the feeling that there was something not right in his every move.

Yan Zhengming stopped practicing, and scowled at his wooden sword.

The waiting-on Taoist children and maids instantly rushed to fan him and wipe off his sweets.

Unfortunately, this time they rubbed him up the wrong way. The young master just hit a bottleneck in swordplay, and was flighty and unsettled at the moment. Now being disturbed by the idiots, it was even harder for him to grab the trace of the indistinct inspiration.

He swept his hand vigorously and raged, "Scram, don't get in the way here! From now on, never come over when I was practicing swordplay!"

The maid Yu-er asked timidly in a hurry, “Young Master, is that a new rule?”

Where was the question coming from? It was only because young master Yan was so unoccupied that he always made trouble out of nothing and made many “rules” — such as clothes and shoes should correspond in color, when to comb his hair, how many times the table in his study should be wiped a day, he must have a cup of cold tea that catered to his taste before speaking in the morning... similar cases were numerous.

Probably the emperor didn’t have so many bad habits as him. If the maid had been a bit less clever, she was unlikely to remember them all.

Young master Yan’s countenance didn’t moderate. His upper lip touched his lower lip, and a new rule burst out of his throat. “From now on, don’t come over unless asked when I am practicing swordplay. — You make a spectacle of yourself!”

Hearing his words by accident, Cheng Qian was surprised that his first senior brother actually knew the phrase “make a spectacle of yourself”.

“Apprentice.” Muchun Zhenren who was instructing Cheng Qian hacked and said.

Yan Zhengming turned around and his eyes fell upon Cheng Qian. The boy didn’t look straight at him, showing the typical manner of an inexperienced child from a poor family, as he lowered his head “sheepishly” and followed his master’s steps closely.

... “sheepishly” having a dig at the sect’s funny incidents where it was concealed from view.

Pointing at Cheng Qian, Muchun said, “Your second junior brother is too busy to take care of both. You take the job to instruct your third junior brother.”

Actually, Li Yun was far more than busy! He was almost pulling down the pavilion with Han Yuan.

Yan Zhengming didn’t sort his own problem out yet, and wasn’t in the mood to help others. Hearing the words, he frowned, and took advantage of his master’s indulgence to erupt all his impatient complaints at him.

He hardly realized that Cheng Qian was way more resentful. Cheng Qian didn’t understand why master wouldn’t instruct him personally. What was first senior brother capable of, anyway?

Teaching him how to make his nose look high-bridged in the mirror?

Yan Zhengming ultimately showed due respect for his master in junior brother’s prescence. He swallowed his objections on the tip of his tongue, controlled his patience and inquired, “Master, I felt something wrong with the third form.”

“What’s wrong?” Muchun Zhenren asked with a kind and pleasant countenance.

Everything was wrong. The Qi didn't circulate smoothly, and Yan Zhengming felt great resistance in his entire body as if rivers were flowing upstream.

Although he understood that in his mind, he just couldn't put into words that sort of mysterious and abstruse feeling. There was a host of words ready in his throat, but they somehow got lost on the way to his mouth. At last, Yan Zhengming ended up blurting out "It's like... it's not beautiful."

Cheng Qian once again confirmed that his first senior brother was a sheer blockhead wearing gold and silver.

His master beamed and said equivocally, "More haste, less speed. You should wait a little."

The good-for-nothing master was always beating around the bush by talking far-fetched and dull nonsense whatever the question.

Yan Zhengming had been used to this for a long time, but he couldn't help acting in a pettish manner and pressed on, "How long do I have to wait?"

"Until you are a few **Cun** [2] taller, perhaps." Muchun Zhenren replied softly.

Yan Zhengming: "..."

There were always several days in a month when he felt like murdering his master.

After finishing his words, Muchun left Cheng Qian to the sect's "most precious treasure" and strolled back to the pavilion to enjoy his tea.

Fuyao Sect followed consistently the ancient tradition that "the master teaches the trade; the apprentice's skill is self-made". Their nonprofessional master never displayed the slightest true ability. He only provided a theoretical framework, and whatever they filled it with.

Yan Zhengming flashed an upset look at his cold third junior brother. But he had nothing to say to him. So he plopped himself down on a seat as if in a fit of pique, and lazily leaned against the stone table. Then a Taoist child came up, took away his wooden sword with both hands, and wiped it carefully with a white handkerchief.

Maybe the Taoist child hadn't even treated his own face so gently.

Subsequently, young master Yan bounced up as if a corpse suddenly rose.

He wrinkled his slender eyebrows and glared his displeasure at Yu-er. But he refused to give the hint and remained in silence. The little girl turned pale at once and was near to tears.

In the end, it was Xueqing who was waiting for Cheng Qian that couldn't stand watching and reminded her in a low voice. "The stone stool is cold."

Only then did Yu-er realize that she just now seated the pampered young master directly on the stone stool. The young master was blaming her for her negligence!

She hurried forward as she wept, and placed three cushions as quickly as a lightning, as if she had committed a crime for which she deserved to die ten thousand deaths.

Yan Zhengming darted another quick glare at her, and descended to take the seat reluctantly. Then he raised his chin towards Cheng Qian. “Go on practicing, I am watching. You can ask me if any problem.”

Cheng Qian simply took his first senior brother as muddy air that obstructed his view. He didn’t even bother to answer, and made up his mind to take no notice of him so that he could fully concentrate on his wooden sword.

Cheng Qian gained an extremely good memory through years of eavesdropping in the tree. Plus, his master’s demonstration was snailish. So his moves reappeared clearly in mind as Cheng Qian recalled.

By virtue of his memory, he cautiously imitated his master’s shaky moves, and compared them with his own timely, in order that he could correct himself ahead of the gadfly behind him.

His ability of imitation could even dwarf monkeys. Yan Zhengming was unconcerned at first, but gradually, his attention was drawn to Cheng Qian — this brat made bold to separate the moves of the first form on the basis of master’s mnemonic rhymes.

He repeated the separated moves at his master’s slow pace. And when he got more familiar, his eyes suddenly sharpened. At the very moment, Yan Zhengming laid down his hand that was reaching for the teacup

involuntarily — he found the vigor residing within the tip of the sword strangely familiar. This boy was modeling himself on Li Yun!

After all Cheng Qian was only imitating, and considering his young age and lack of strength, he couldn't inspire the same imposing spirit as Li Yun by a long shot. But with that vigor, his wooden sword made a sudden change — as if a piece of paper lying flat on the ground swelled into a solid.

But the outline was still vague. Leave aside the fact that his swordplay couldn't be mentioned in the same breath with Li Yun's, it was arguable whether his basic moves were right or not.

That moment gave Yan Zhengming an insight, however. He thought he might have seen the will of Fuyao Wooden Sword.

Sword will was not a peach on the tree, nor a fish in the water. Without decades of unremitting efforts and without body and sword as one, it was impossible to form the sword will — in Cheng Qian's case, however, of course he couldn't possibly form the sword will just by making some simple moves. It would be good enough if he could hold the sword steadily and make sure it didn't drop on his foot.

But the young lad just stepped into an immortal sect, his frame of mind coincidentally corresponded to the first form “the Roc's Long Flight”. Yan Zhengming bethought himself of the feeling when he saw talismans all over the mountain for the first time. That was fresh, curious, and full of irrepressible hopes for future...

Perhaps that all didn't amount to the "sword will", but the Fuyao Wooden Sword happened to coincide with the wielder's frame of mind, and automatically guided the wielder.

Yan Zhengming jumped to his feet. Watching Cheng Qian's practicing swordplay accidentally enabled him to touch the essence of the problem that had puzzled him for so long — the kaleidoscopic changes of the sword art, and why his master never explained — the sword art itself was alive, it explained.

The reason why Yan Zhengming started to feel his ability fell short of his wishes from the second form "seek and pursue", and why it became even more difficult to continue when he reached the third form, was now brought to light — it was because he knew neither the taste of seeking and pursuing nor the meaning of "backfire".

The wooden sword couldn't guide him anymore.

Notes:

[1] Jin: a unit of weight (= 0.5 kilogram).

[2] Cun: a unit of length (= 3.33 centimeters).

Having figured that out, Yan Zhengming knew he should go down the mountain on a journey.

Sufferings and miseries could exercise a man's body, while delight of meeting and grief of parting could temper a man's mentality.

Although Fuyao Wooden Swordplay was only a primary swordplay, it implicated the ups and downs of a mortal life. It was not something created from imagination and divorced from reality. If he kept hanging around in the Land of the Tender, one thousand or ten thousand years would bring the same result, that his pace would be forever unable to catch up to the ever changing world.

Not everybody could get enlightened as luck would have it. If an ordinary cultivator could find out where the rub was, they would probably be delirious with joy, and take the bull by the horns to strive for a breakthrough.

But was young master Yan anywhere near ordinary?

The words "go down the mountain on a journey" only flashed into his head for a split second, and then were rapidly submerged by his imagination of the hardships and inconveniences of an arduous journey.

Speaking of going down the mountain, Yan Zhengming felt a terrible headache at the bare of idea of how many pieces of luggage he would have to take, and his laziness would rebel against him and take the control of his body, hampering him from heading for a promising future.

“Traveling? Whatever! I am not going anyway — screw the bottleneck, who cares.” The young master thought. He finally decided not to lend himself to worries.

Yan Zhengming had made up his mind to neglect the bit of nonfluency in his moves. He deluded himself into thinking that he had mastered it as he remembered the moves, and was planning to ask his master for the fourth form tomorrow.

The unambitious and perfunctory first senior brother began to slack off comfortably. He tossed several stones at his fourth junior brother who was climbing up the tree for the bird nest, accurately, but with moderate strength.

Looking at Han Yuan howling on the ground, Yan Zhengming felt that he had made an achievement in cultivation and there was no need for him to be too serious.

At midday, the mutual torture for the master and his apprentices came to an end.

Everyone except first senior brother went back to their own yard for lunch and rest, and would practice independently in the afternoon — those who

were unwilling to practice could play with monkeys in the mountain.

Muchun Zhenren gave his apprentices enough freedom. He only warned them to obey the sect rules and not to wander around the mountain in the evening of the first and fifteenth day of every month.

Only Yan Zhengming had to stay and continue to face his master's wizened face in the afternoon.

Seeing Taoist children successively bringing wood and a graver, Li Yun explained to his junior brothers, "They are used for carving charms. Charms are categorized into two groups, visible charms and invisible charms. Visible charms are inscribed on material objects; the most common is the wood. Some ace masters can also use gold as material. Invisible charms are way more powerful, they can be inscribed in the water and on the air, even mere thoughts can make them — that is a legend though, as none ever saw one. Probably only almighty beings can make it."

Cheng Qian feigned disinterest, but was actually straining his ears.

After all, charms were the root of magic tools, and magic tools were the most direct impression of cultivation for ordinary people.

Han Yuan came closer and asked intimately, "Second Senior Brother, what is an almighty being?"

Li Yun grinned at him and said, "Nowadays, who on earth dare to claim to be almighty? True almighty beings have already ascended to the heaven."

Han Yuan didn't have a good impression of first senior brother, but he also knew he couldn't afford to provoke him. On top of that, the little beggar didn't have so high self-esteem as Cheng Qian, and he wasn't the sort of person to bear a deep grudge, a sachet of pine-nut candies was enough to make him give up his hatred with a smile.

Watching Yan Zhengming's relaxed figure admiringly, he asked Li Yun eagerly, "Senior Brother, when can we learn that?"

"We can't learn it yet." Li Yun waved his hand and said in mock regret. "To learn charms, you should have energy feel first — don't ask me what energy feel is, I don't know either. According to Master, it is a mysterious ability to communicate with the heaven and earth... but as you will know in the future, you can't take his words too seriously because they are abstruse and don't make sense."

Li Yun had a mean curling mouth, which made him look like he was smiling all the time. But when he actually smiled, he looked even more vicious. Speaking of this, he paused purposely and frowned affectedly. "However, due to poor talents or bad luck, some people may never have energy feel."

At that, Han Yuan tensed and straightened up unconsciously. "That's a pity."

"Of course it is." Said Li Yun. "Without energy feel, however proficient we are in swordplay, we can do nothing more than keep fit with it."

To start with, Cheng Qian didn't take Li Yun's words to heart, because he had concluded that Yan Zhengming was only a macaroni. If even a macaroni could acquire energy feel after frittering away seven or eight years, he might as well give up on cultivating and go back to being a farmer or trading, if he couldn't do at least this much.

But at this point, Cheng Qian had perceived the insinuation and hook in Li Yun's words.

Cheng Qian turned around. Looking straight at Li Yun, he asked in a lazy tone, "Second Senior Brother, you sound like you already know the method to arouse energy feel, right?"

Li Yun smiled at him, his eyes as well as brows crinkled into crooks. He didn't respond though, instead, he stared at Cheng Qian meaningfully.

But Cheng Qian wouldn't be hooked. He said indifferently, "Oh. That's awesome. May senior brother get what you wish soon."

If a method to arouse energy feel really existed, why hadn't Li Yun tried it out himself? Evidently he had an axe to grind and wanted a fall guy to test for him.

The brat was oversensitive, Li Yun thought as his crooked eyes twitched.

But Han Yuan could hardly repress his curiosity. He pursued impatiently right away, "What? What method?"

Li Yun thus shifted from Cheng Qian to Han Yuan. But he kept him in suspense. “I can’t say, or I will break the rule.”

Though what he was saying was “I can’t say”, he sounded like “come and ask”.

Li Yun dug a huge hole in front of him, and Han Yuan was so cooperative that he jumped in without demur.

Han Yuan seemed to think that he became good friends with his second senior brother during the toad incident. He kept pumping Li Yun for the answer. With all his pretended dodging failed, Li Yun was “compelled” to reply in whispers, “I’ve read a book about sceneries of Fuyao mountain. It says that there’s a strong monster pressed down under the mountain, and every night of the first and fifteenth day of the lunar month, the monster’s demonic energy will echo with the moon, and pure and turbid energy veiling the mountain will swirl and surge. At that time, if one stands on the caves where the two energies meet, even a mortal could easily obtain energy feel.”

Then he suddenly changed his tone. “Of course, sect leader — our master has commanded, we are not allowed to go out of the yard on these two nights. The cave in the mountain is especially a forbidden area.”

Han Yuan seemed to be lost in thought at his words.

“Junior brothers shouldn’t have finished writing the sect rules 49 times yet. It is written plainly that you have to cultivate in a systematic way. You own

good aptitudes, so you will have energy feel sooner or later. It's not worthwhile to take a shortcut by breaking the rules. Do you agree, third junior brother?" Li Yun pretended to be exhorting them.

"Of course second senior brother." Cheng Qian smiled stiffly.

Li Yun: "..."

Li Yun scrutinized Cheng Qian from head to toe. His reticent third junior brother was thin and tiny as though he hadn't reached the age of growth, and no one would see his face once he lowered his head.

Li Yun developed a temporary confusion about whether his third junior brother's inarticulacy was because of his young age and cowardice or a result of his oversensitivity.

Cheng Qian's echoing his words placed Li Yun in dilemma. He forced a smile and said, "Third junior brother is well-mannered indeed."

Not far away, Yan Zhengming took over a bowl of osmanthus and plum soup from a Taoist child's hands. He lifted his head and happened to see the scene. He had always felt that Li Yun was a rogue with sinister designs, so he somehow saw evil plots from his second junior brother's eyes when he grinned.

On a whim, Yan Zhengming turned around and said to the Taoist child, "Go and ask that little... the shortest kid. I forgot again, what's his name?"

“That’s third martial uncle, Cheng Qian.” The Taoist child answered with reverence and awe.

“Oh yes.” Yan Zhengming nodded. “Tell him to wait. Just say Master asked me to give some advice on his swordplay after I finish talisman practice.”

“He didn’t give a shit when I asked him to do so, and now he uses me as a pretext.” Muchun Zhenren thought to himself. He looked at Yan Zhengming but didn’t lay bare his lie — the young master was quite lonely growing up on such a large mountain and he seldom got a kid as a companion.

The Taoist child trotted to pass the word. Hearing that, Cheng Qian didn’t give a comment, he only thought that first senior brother might have gotten up on the wrong side of the bed.

But Han Yun was reluctant to leave. He grumbled, “I was thinking of going to your place to play.”

Cheng Qian glanced at him and thought, “You’d better be played by your second senior brother.”

Harboring such mockery, he nonchalantly said goodbye to Li Yun and Han Yuan, and waited aside as told quietly — certainly not for young master Yan, whom Cheng Qian was uncertain whether to call senior brother or senior sister. He was in fact curious about the so-called “charms”.

But soon he found out that people without energy feel were unable to sense the profoundness of charms — at least from what he could see, first senior

brother did nothing that whole afternoon. He was simply carving vertical lines on the wood, with a knife, under his master's nose.

The only gain was that Cheng Qian saw their master's strictness.

As expected, first senior brother was a hundred-percent macaroni. He had only sat for a short while before he rocked from side to side as if there were nails on his bottom, and bustled the Taoist children and maids around.

One minute he felt his hair knot was too tight and required re-combing, and the next he disliked the sweats on his body and would like to get his clothes changed; and now he felt like going to the restroom, then he thirsted... but when the water was served, he either found it too cool or thought it scalding. Nothing was to his liking. In a nutshell, he couldn't remain seated.

And he often lost his concentration and often glanced this way and that; he sometimes criticized Li Yun and Muchun unvoiced in his heart, and on occasion hummed a tune lately composed by the maids. In a word, his mind was not on carving the wood at all.

Although Cheng Qian had no idea about the benefits of carving the wood, he despised first senior brother's behavior a lot. "Idle folks lack no excuses." He thought.

Muchun Zhenren already knew his undeserving apprentice would make a fuss about nothing. He placed a sandglass on Yan Zhengming's desk. It only took half an hour for the sand to run out, and that was when Yan Zhengming's practice would end. But as soon as his attention wandered, the

sand would stop flowing. Therefore, the half-hour practice would usually be prolonged until it got dark.

Yan Zhengming had thought he and his master could become bosom friends in the aspect of “floating through life”, but when it came to practicing charms, his master became so unlike him, to the point of being insensitive.

Muchun Zhenren had said, Yan Zhengming’s Tao was actually the Tao of sword. Such cultivators mostly had a strong willpower, but there were exceptions, Yan Zhengming was one of them. Therefore, he must be trained doubly so that his talent would not be dissipated.

Cheng Qian watched for a while and felt he got not benefit from it at all, so he withdrew his sight and asked the Taoist child beside him for paper and writing brushes, and got down to doing homework for today — write sect rules first, then *Scriptures on Clarity and Stillness* his master read this morning.

Seeing that, Muchun softened his severe expression and beckoned Cheng Qian: “Cheng Qian, come here. The light isn’t good there.”

Yan Zhengming frowned and looked upward right into his master’s bird-eyes.

Where could the light be poor at noon? Clearly his master was disgusting him by letting him know he wasn’t as dependable as a little kid.

Yan Zhengming turned to have a look at Cheng Qian's handwriting. He briefly forgot the fact that it was himself that had asked him to stay. Venting his anger on Cheng Qian unreasonably, he said, "A dog's footprints are far better than your writing."

Cheng Qian was too young, after all, he didn't have an involved mind. Hearing that, he retorted without even making a peep, "Thanks for senior brother's edification. But it makes no difference however neat the prints are, because the little beast cannot remain seated at all."

Finishing the words, he flashed an ironic glance at the sandglass. Yan Zhengming fumed, because he found the bloody sandglass stopped flowing again, expectedly.

Muchun Zhenren had taken it for granted that his decision was perfect – his first apprentice was highly fickle although he always looked on the brighter side of things; while the little apprentice was prone to split hairs despite his calmness. It couldn't be better if the two busters could complement each other.

Unfortunately, it turned out they were going to explode before complementing each other.

Muchun Zhenren had no choice but to separate them by force. He asked a Taoist child to take Cheng Qian to have a bath and change his clothes, for he was sweaty from practicing swordplay. Then he zeroed in on his tough first apprentice by droning dully the *Scriptures on Clarity and Stillness* again.

Their master's chanting was the living representation of an “eyesore and earsore”. With the figure of a weasel and the voice of a duck quacking, he resoundingly stilled the running sandglass, and irritated his first apprentice who almost rose to bite his master murderously.

Yan Zhengming's forbearance was driven beyond its limits. He threw the graver onto the desk and raged, “Master, what are you doing?”

“You are uncalm. I am chanting to rest your mind.” His master answered without even lifting his eyelids.

When the chant was paining Yan Zhengming, Cheng Qian returned. Yan Zhengming finally got an opportunity to unleash his vexation. He sniffed and shouted, “You incensed his clothes with sandalwood? What’s wrong with you? Is he going to become a monk?”

The Taoist child meekly mumbled “yes, yes”. He was too afraid to say Cheng Qian wanted that incense.

“Change the incense to hibiscus –” Yan Zhengming yelled at him.

“– the heaven is active; the earth is calm...” Muchun Zhenren’s voice grew even louder.

His voice was like the crunch that sew the timber, which made Yan Zhengming go hot under the collar. “Master! I am not uncalm!”

Muchun lifted his eyelids and said in a placid manner, “You’re uncalm so you will be disturbed by external things, and care about whatever the incense. Don’t take your third junior brother as a censer. – How about this? To assist you with your cultivation, I move to your Land of the Tender today and chant all night for you.”

Yan Zhengming: “...”

The old weasel had an addiction to chanting, so he definitely meant it. Could he possibly live to see tomorrow if the weasel really chanted all night

long?

Yan Zhengming was forced to swallow his anger and sat back. Enduring the incense of sandalwood which smelled like rotten wood to him, he picked up the graver indignantly and began carving vertical lines in the wood as though whipping a corpse.

The “censer” Cheng Qian sat down silently to continue his homework, with the feeling that he was sitting next to an irritable big rabbit.

Their master had assessed Han Yuan as flighty and impulsive, but he definitely proved no match for Yan Zhengming. At least Han Yuan’s being flighty affected nobody else, while Yan Zhengming would always involve everyone around him.

Cheng Qian started to see the benefits of being with first senior brother – there was a distinct contrast.

Once Cheng Qian got serious, he could break away from the external disturbance. He carefully imitated the calligraphy from his memory, and soon became engrossed in the fun of writing. Bound in the smell of sandalwood, which seemed to have the effects of smoothing the nerves, Cheng Qian gradually brushed aside his composure-lacking first senior brother.

Yan Zhengming was holding in a bellyful of sulks. He clamored for desserts, but felt over stuffed after that. So he stood up and walked around the pavilion.

But soon he found he was left out. His master was sitting upright on a hassock absorbedly in meditation while chanting quietly; he was persistently immersed in scriptures. And his junior brother was writing his ugly characters carefully as if doing embroidery, without once lifting his head.

With the two, the atmosphere in the pavilion became so serene that it almost stilled, even the Taoist children standing in attendance couldn't help but hold their breath.

The serenity gave young master Yan some embarrassing boredom. He resigned himself to sitting back in front of the sandglass. After chilling out for some time, he had no alternative but to pick up the graver again and got down to the monotonous routine practice.

Amazingly, he didn't rock the boat this time. It was the abrupt ringing of the sandglass that brought Yan Zhengming back to senses. He unbelievably found today's practice actually ended prematurely.

The next few days followed the routine. Every morning, the four apprentices would suffer the torture of listening to their master chanting.

They were unclear about where their master managed to find so many scriptures. He read one book per day with no repetitions. After Taoist scriptures there were Buddhist scriptures, and following Buddhist scriptures came his self-composed ones, whose content was unstrained and not limited by the sect, leading to frequent self-contradictions.

After chanting was the swordplay practice.

Yan Zhengming shamelessly pretended to be well versed in the first three forms in spite of a superficial understanding, and asked his master to teach him the fourth. Li Yun restrained himself a bit and stopped making trouble all over the mountain as he learned some new moves. And there was no need to mention Cheng Qian. Only Han Yuan was firm in being a drag on his senior brothers and destroyed every bird nest around Mission Hall heartlessly.

Every afternoon, Yan Zhengming would be trapped in the Mission Hall, carving charms with dark clouds of discontent overhead. Cheng Qian either did homework next to him, or helped his master prune the flowers and grass. It seemed like his master had the intention to make up for the love he didn't enjoy in his earlier ages. He always saved for him some snacks that children liked; and while Yan Zhengming was carving the wood resentfully, he would deliberately ask Cheng Qian to take a break, and tell him several eccentric folk tales.

Yan Zhengming sometimes felt that the short kid was here to compete, against him, for their master's love. However, it was undeniable that with Cheng Qian by his side, he could sit for a little bit longer due to his influence.

Yan Zhengming fell into a daze when the sand ran out today, the numbness lingering in his hand. Just now, he felt a mysterious power developed from the friction of the graver against the wood.

“Concentrate. Absorb Qi into your body.” A hoarse voice rang out in his ears. *“The great I call the departing, and the departing I call the beyond. The beyond I call home... Around it moveth, and it suffereth not –”*

Cheng Qian had an ability to take stock of the situation. He stood up and stepped backwards spontaneously before his master asked him to. In the meantime, he felt an inarticulate current of air hovered around his body for a moment, and then flowed over into first senior brother’s body like the rivers running into the sea.

It was his first contact with the subterranean area behind the depressing world. Cheng Qian didn’t have a clue to Yan Zhengming’s feelings at that time, but he heard an indistinct voice as well. Right now, the sun had set to the other side of Fuyao Mountain; the dimly discernible echoes reached every corner of the mountain teeming with spiritual energies. Countless different sounds converged as one and engendered a strange feeling in Cheng Qian. They sounded like the remote past and the vague future were whispering to each other across the time present. He desperately tried to make out what they were saying, but their words just flowed by him gently like quicksand in the river of time.

Cheng Qian was practically obsessed.

Suddenly, a hand grasped his shoulder and Cheng Qian got startled, as if he jolted out of a bizarre and motley nightmare. He looked behind and saw Muchun Zhenren dimly.

Muchun's stare fell upon him from above. Cheng Qian felt his face coolish. He reached his hand to wipe his face, only to find that tears were streaming down his cheeks.

He felt awkward, and was at a loss as to what had happened, so he looked at his master blankly.

"The five colors combined the human eye will blind. The five notes in one sound the human ear confound. The five tastes when they blend the human mouth offend." Muchun Zhenren's voice thinned into a thread and pierced into Cheng Qian's ears. "How can you be 'free and easy' [1](#) when you see too much, hear too much, think too much, and wish too much? Wake up! Now!"

His words were like a wake-up call. There was a buzzing in Cheng Qian's head, and after a blink, he recovered his sight and saw first senior brother sitting rooted in place rigidly. It looked like he was deep in meditation. The wooden blocks inscribed with messy lines lay scattered across the desk.

Cheng Qian sat there in a daze as Muchun Zhenren ruffled his hair. He asked, "Master, just now I heard people talking..."

"Oh, they are all forefathers of our sect."

Cheng Qian was shocked.

"Our sect has a history of over one thousand years, is it strange that we have a bunch of forefathers?"

“Where are they now?”

“Of course they are all dead.”

“Didn’t they ascend to the heaven?” Cheng Qian goggled.

Muchun lowered his own head. Looking at him kindly, he asked in reply, “Is there any distinction between ascending to the heaven and being dead?”

“There is, of course. Doesn’t ascending to the heaven mean immortality?”

Muchun froze temporarily, and then he seemed amused by him. He didn’t give a straight answer, instead, he said, “Ah... You are still a little kid, don’t keep talking about death. Those are things you will understand when you grow up.”[2](#)

With that, he walked back to the seat of the host and sat down. He looked at Yan Zhengming, wearing a woebegone face. Cheng Qian heard him mutter, “Why must he get into meditation now? He really chose a terrible moment. Where shall I have my dinner?”

Cheng Qian: “...”

Consequently, the dinner was moved to the Mission Hall, which should have been a place to transmit wisdom, impart knowledge and resolve doubts. Amid scattered charms and scriptures lay a toasted chicken, surrounded by other dishes and the unconscious first senior brother.

Muchun asked Cheng Qian to sit on the floor with him. He picked up a chunk of meat for Cheng Qian lovingly, and dragged over a piece of paper covered with scriptures and placed it on the desk. Then he urged, “Have some more, and you will grow taller – spit the bones on the paper.”

Cheng Qian took up his bowl quietly, feeling that he could hardly have the least bit of awe of the Mission Hall from this moment on.

After dinner, Muchun had to keep guard over first senior brother. He commanded a Taoist child to wrap up a half Jin³ of desserts for Cheng Qian in case he went hungry in the night. Today was exactly the fifteenth day of the month, the day when going to the mountain cave was forbidden. But Muchun didn’t repeat his warning to Cheng Qian; he was confident that Cheng Qian wouldn’t go out to cause trouble and would write the sect rules instead.

Indeed, Cheng Qian wouldn’t, but someone else would.

No sooner had he entered the door of Qing’an Dwelling than Han Yuan followed in. Han Yuan made a big fuss over everything in the yard, after which he took up the desserts Cheng Qian left there, and praised profusely as he ate most of them. Splashing the scraps of the desserts, he said, “It’s no fun for you to stay with first senior brother all day – you’d better play with us. Today second senior brother taught me quite a few moves, I almost learned all the moves of the first form.”

Cheng Qian dodged all the scraps which were as many as snows. He smiled in silence at his idiot junior brother, and thought in mockery, presumably he

should go up to the heaven in a few days since he learned the first form so quickly.

Pointing at the yard, Han Yuan said to Cheng Qian, “Your yard is so shabby, barely better than Master’s. You have to see mine tomorrow. My yard is ten times as large as yours, and there’s a pool at the back, we can go swimming in summer – can you swim? Ah, forget it. You domesticated kids wouldn’t dare go out of home, much less go swimming. I’ll teach you to swim. I promise you’re bound to be a good swimmer in one summer.”

Cheng Qian declined his kindness. The fact was he didn’t want to go around with dregs like Han Yuan.

The little beggar ate up the desserts during the time he chatted. At length, he stopped shooting the breeze pointlessly and got into the subject.

He burped and straightened up. Lowering his voice, he said, “Do you remember the cave... second senior brother mentioned?”

Cheng Qian had expected this, so he replied placidly, “Junior Brother, that’s violation of the sect rules – now that you have almost mastered the first form, can you read the characters of the sect rules?”

Han Yuan thought this senior brother who was even younger than him was literally unreasonable. So he lectured him with an air of superiority.

“What’s the benefit of memorizing the sect rules? I’ve never seen someone that is as stubborn as you. Didn’t you hear what second senior brother said? Without energy feel, you are at best an acrobat even if you master the full

set of swordplay. How long will it take if you cultivate step by step? You can't always stay in th... the..."

"Stay in the rut." Uttered Cheng Qian.

"Whatever. I'm going to the cave anyway, are you in?" Han Yuan waved his hand.

Cheng Qian showed plainly that he was a "honest and good" boy by saying, "I dare not."

He rebuffed without a second thought. Han Yuan was disappointed at first, and then felt disdainful – kids like Han Yuan that were sturdily built but simple-minded always held in detestation "good kids" like Cheng Qian, who were obedient and adhered to rules.

"Domesticated." Han Yuan grimaced and darted an unhappy look at Cheng Qian.

Cheng Qian, in turn, completely took his junior brother as a stupid mangy dog. He felt any like or hate towards him was a waste of his feelings. So he took up the teacup, showing no attitude.

Han Yuan took a few more looks at him. For the sake of that sachet of pine-nut candies, his temper gradually passed off. With kind of pity and sympathy, as well as the superiority of a stray dog viewing a domestic cat, he shook his head and sighed, "Domesticated kids are all porcelain."

This afternoon in the Mission Hall, Cheng Qian had an impression of the spirituality of the mountain and its lurking mysteries. And he also knew what Li Yun was thinking about. Li Yun must be wondering what exactly was there in the cave in the evening of the first and fifteenth days of every month, but he didn't want to risk breaking the rules. Assumedly he had already planned to get a fall guy for him.

Although Han Yuan failed to persuade Cheng Qian, he didn't leave empty-handed. At least, he had a late-night supper at Cheng Qian's place.

"Porcelain" Cheng Qian saw Han Yuan out courteously and watched him leave, waiting to see what the sucker would end up with.

"What would happen if he breaks the rules?" Cheng Qian thought unconcernedly. "Will he get a caning? Have his palm beaten? Or be made to transcribe scriptures? – it's not a big deal if the punishment is to transcribe scriptures."

Unexpectedly, however, Han Yuan didn't return that night.

1. free and easy: the precept Muchun Zhenren granted Cheng Qian
2. it is considered improper for kids to talk about death in Chinese culture.
3. Jin: a unit of weight, equivalent to 0.5 kilogram.

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Han Yuan was missing.

Classes were canceled the next day. Their master, together with the Taoist children, searched every nook and cranny all over the mountain, but no trace of him.

Honestly, Cheng Qian didn't have a clear idea about what the cave was, nor did he realize the gravity of this matter initially. Therefore, when asked by his master, he just came clean and told him frankly that Han Yuan came to talk him into exploring the cave together last night.

His master turned pale on the spot.

Yan Zhengming was sitting slumped against the stone table. Hearing the background, he suddenly straightened up. "Exploring the cave in the evening of the fifteenth day? Was he asking to die?"

Ever since the Taoist child ran to report Han Yuan's disappearance, Li Yun had remained in silence with his head down, pretending he had nothing to do with that. But hearing what Yan Zhengming said, he finally looked up. With some urgency in his tone, he asked, "First Senior Brother, what exactly is there in the evening of the fifteenth day?"

Factually, the alleged “cave” referred to a natural pond at the back of the mountain with nothing peculiar. At most, if you had to know, the water is a little deep.

The sect rules only prohibited visits in the evening of the first and fifteenth days. Li Yun had been there more than once, but he never sussed out what was special about the pond.

Yan Zhengming turned to him, his eyebrows gradually knit. “Li Yun, if my memory doesn’t fail me, I told you, didn’t I? The cave connects to the Demons Valley at the back of the mountain. There’s a strong monster guarding the gate. But the phases of the moon on the first and fifteenth evening have special power, so the gate will open itself. Some monsters with low cultivation levels that didn’t rid themselves of natural ferocity will try to come out. To avoid any potential tragedy, it is forbidden for unskilled disciples to hang around the mountain on these two nights.”

Li Yun was dumbfounded – Yan Zhengming did tell him that when he pressed about the cave. But he gave a different version which didn’t prove well-founded. His original words went like this, “What is there in the cave? Big monsters for sure. A little dainty sheep like you is not enough to fill their tooth gap. Don’t go deliver yourself as a dish to them.”

Good Heavens! Who could have believed that a remark as deceptive as the lie, “the wolves will eat you up if you don’t sleep”, was actually the truth!?

In the next moment, Li Yun’s face went deathly pale.

It was him that had egged Han Yuan on to explore the cave. Beyond gainsaying, he had ulterior motives to designedly entice Han Yuan into navigating the way for him. But he was only thinking that, if by any chance Han Yuan was caught breaking the rules, the worst that he would be facing was nothing more than being made to write the sect rules a couple of times.

The thought of wanting Han Yuan to die never, ever entered his mind!

Muchun Zhenren paced back and forth apprehensively. Suddenly, he halted and got hold of Cheng Qian by his shoulders. “Did Han Yuan tell you why he was going there?”

Cheng Qian hadn’t recovered from the astonishment – nor did he feel any better than Li Yun. He was well aware that, in a sense, he was also a person in the know, and one who stood and looked through the sidelines.

Despite his indifference and sharp tongue, he was far from venomous. If Han Yuan ended up being dragged back and beaten in the palm by master, he would, without a shadow of doubt, be perversely delighted; but if what awaited Han Yuan was death...

Cheng Qian felt ice-cold inside. Under his master’s steady gaze, he remained silent for a good while, until he, with great difficulty, found his voice. “Junior Brother said, that those who just started cultivating could acquire energy feel in the cave, on the first and fifteenth nights of every month...”

Cheng Qian didn't expose Li Yun, because in his mind, he was equally despicable as Li Yun. It would be utterly shameless if they passed the buck to one another at this particular moment.

But things didn't happen as Cheng Qian wished. The brainless young master Yan, who always spoke his mind, completed Cheng Qian's sentence automatically when he had hardly finished speaking.

"That ugly brat doesn't even know what energy feel is." Said Yan Zhengming impersonally. "Decidedly, Li Yun told him that."

Li Yun drew himself up instinctively with a guilty haste. In a fluster, he defended himself. "I... I only told him a speculation, and didn't ask him to go to the cave. I didn't anticipate that he would dare to flagrantly violate the rules even though it's only a few days since he was initiated..."

"How could you have the cheek to talk nonsense now? Li Yun, your evil designs are no stranger to me. Don't think you can fan the flames in the dark and no one will notice – as for that ugly beggar, I don't think there's a need to look for him. Supposing he has been dragged into the Demons Valley for one night, it is too late to even collect his body. Most likely, even bones are not left." Yan Zhengming interrupted him coldly.

Li Yun didn't feel any uncomfortableness about the first part of Yan Zhengming's sentence, for they had been long loathing each other. But the second part genuinely painted his face paler.

Li Yun rose to his feet, nearly knocking over the ink on the desk. “Master, I... I... I...”

He stuttered three “I”, unable to complete the sentence.

Li Yun was all at sea with his mind blank. Muchun Zhenren’s heavy look fell upon him, which he evaded out of his own accord – It was too difficult for him to either acknowledge it was he who incited Han Yuan, or to confront the fact that he might have caused his little junior brother’s death.

If he had enough courage, he would have gone to the cave himself; would it be necessary for him to find a scapegoat then?

Cowardice is a trap that one might easily fall into. Nonetheless, the resultant remorse was too heavy, a young man could hardly bear it.

Li Yun had no place to rest his evasive eyes. Eventually he looked at Cheng Qian and said to him as if clutching at the last straw, “Third Junior Brother, you heard it. I... I didn’t intend to incite him to go to the cave, right? And I warned him that it was a violation of the sect rules.”

Cheng Qian bowed his head deep to the ground, silent. This topic was weighing down his mind, and he could hardly breath under the smite of his conscience.

Muchun Zhenren stood up. Panicking, Li Yun shouted, “Master...”

But a bang interrupted him – Muchun Zhenren slumped back into the stone chair as though he was pulled by some force in the air.

The sound was so loud that even Yan Zhengming, who was busy quarreling with Li Yun, turned around. Baffled, he asked, “Master, what’s wrong?”

Muchun Zhenren didn’t reply instantly, however. It looked like he didn’t feel the pain in his bottom as he calmly adjusted his sitting position and said waving his hand, “Silence! – Cheng Qian, fetch me the old sandalwood tablet hanging over there.”

Cheng Qian did not dare to delay for even a moment. He trotted to fetch the tablet, that was half a Chi¹ square, in the corner of Mission Hall, and presented it to his master. Simultaneously, he gave his master a few secretive glances.

Muchun Zhenren sat erectly with his eyelids slouching. He seemed to be the same as usual. But Cheng Qian was an acute observer that could perceive one’s happiness, anger, grief and joy from a mere exhalation. He couldn’t explain why, but he had an unceasing feeling that there was something wrong with his master.

Despite Cheng Qian being acquainted with that face and sitting posture, he felt as if Muchun Zhenren was wrapped in a mantle of ineffable gloom and frost.

Was master in a temper because of Han Yuan? Or was he hit on the tailbone by the bang just now?

But Cheng Qian had no time to give it further reflection, as Muchun Zhenren suddenly reached out a hand, put his fingers together into the shape

of a knife, and slashed at the tablet. His hand was pallid and wizened, as shrunk as a chicken's feet. Whereas his fingertips were sharpened with fierce strength, like an iron sword in icy water.

It was only at this moment, that Cheng Qian developed a brand-new notion of charms – people without energy feel could also notice the formidable power of charms, depending on who created it. That strong power forced him back and made his flesh creep.

Everyone on the spot had touched the incredible power in the course of forming a talisman. The whole Fuyao Mountain seemed to be startled and trembling. In half a shake, the talisman was made. Muchun Zhenren retracted his hand, which had no sawdust on its fingers, and took a good look at the charms with some nameless apathy.

That was not the expression of someone looking at a lifeless object. But rather, it seemed like he was looking at a human being, with elements of harshness and scorn.

“Zhengming, come here.” Muchun Zhenren called over his first apprentice. His regular drawl vanished, replaced by an energetic tone. He spaced each word for emphasis, like a forceful man in exalted position, making it hard for the listener to defy him.

He handed the tablet over to Yan Zhengming, who was petrified by the genuine power of charms, and said, “Take this and go to the cave to find Zipeng2 Zhenren. Tell her the whole story, and ask her to help searching –

Don't worry, your little junior brother is still alive, he may survive from those monsters, as long as you make haste."

A bundle of lethargy passed through Yan Zhengming, but he decided to prioritize this, as he knew what was at stake. Knowing his master had no one else to assign, he didn't complain hearing the order, without retorting or even glancing at the cane chair which he used as means of transportation in the mountain. He simply took the talisman, turned around, picked up his sword, and popped off towards the outside.

Cheng Qian stopped brooding over what was wrong with his master at once. Because in his mind, first senior brother was the most unreliable person in the world. He doubted that Han Yuan could survive if master sent Yan Zhengming to his rescue.

So he took up a wooden sword and said without even thinking, "Master, I am going too."

Muchun was surprised. Presently he nodded as Yan Zhengming rolled his eyes. "Well, go."

For a moment Li Yun was stunned. Then he hastily got up and pleaded in a tentative voice, "Master – Senior Brother, take me, please."

Yan Zhengming stared at him with a stony glance, saying nothing. He quickened his pace, letting Li Yun follow.

Young master Yan fished a white handkerchief out of his bosom and threw it to Cheng Qian with the sandalwood tablet, and ordered, “You can do nothing other than be a drag on me. Wipe the sawdust off the tablet first.”

First senior brother rarely acted so swiftly; and Cheng Qian was rarely so cooperative.

He was racked with guilt for letting Han Yuan trespass into the forbidden area, and had already taken it as his responsibility to rescue Han Yuan. For now, whatever Yan Zhengming said, he wouldn’t take it personally. Contrarily, he even buried his previous ill will and followed up. Wiping the tablet, he asked in a good-natured way, “Senior Brother, who is Zipeng Zhenren?”

Not getting his expected retort, Yan Zhengming winded down. Then it suddenly struck him that he was actually bothering with a kid that didn’t reach the height of his chest. Thinking of this, Yan Zhengming felt somewhat ashamed.

So he went silent for a while, and then answered flatly, “Zipeng Zhenren is the big monster guarding the mountain cave. She is reasonably open to talking. I’ve paid a new-year call to her.”

“What kind of monster?” Cheng Qian asked again. “Wouldn’t it be better if master himself visits her?”

“Of course not.” Yan Zhengming looked quite impatient. He walked so fast that Cheng Qian had to run in order to catch up with him. He heard first

senior brother's reply coming from the wind, "It's not suitable for master to visit Zipeng Zhenren, because she is a hen – Hey, stay close and do not question me. Be careful to not break a taboo in the Demons Valley, if you don't want to be detained as Han Yuan's companion that is."

It took a while for Cheng Qian to understand that their master wouldn't personally visit Zipeng Zhenren, probably to avoid being offensive – after all, "the weasel goes to pay his respect to the hen"³ didn't sound very pleasing.

Come to think of it, his eyelids twitched sharply. He suddenly realised that his master was a real, genuine, living weasel, who secluded himself in the deep mountains!

Nevertheless, at present, the recluse weasel's situation was not so optimistic. After Cheng Qian and his senior brothers left, he ordered the Taoist children to clear out, after which he instantly collapsed onto the table, and a gust of dark smoke poured out of his chest. The thing that had possessed his body landed on the ground, taking the hazy shape of a human being.

Muchun Zhenren's hand which had just carved the charms shivered heavily. After a long time, he said in a hoarse voice, "Are you crazy?"

The black shadow stood in silence for quite a while, and said softly, "The monster king must show respect where my marks go. As long as they hold on to my talisman, they'll be safe and sound. Relax. This is a mere adventure for them."

Muchun Zhenren wore a rather sullen expression, but he couldn't stand up as though his body was fettered. He deepened his voice and said, "Although I have very limited ability and knowledge, and my sight dimmed from old age, I'm still far from being unable to notice invisible charms integrated with visible ones. For a single trip to the Demons Valley, the common lightning-summoning charm is sufficient for them to protect themselves. And considering the type of person Zipeng Zhenren is, she won't make things difficult for several kids... What the hell are you up to? What is this carrier that you embedded in the invisible charms?"

This time, the black shadow didn't respond though.

"Speak!" Muhun Zhenren thundered.

However, the black shadow had already vanished like a billow of smoke, leaving no trace but a faint disappearing sigh.

As if it never existed.

1. Chi: a unit of length, equal to $\frac{1}{3}$ meter.
2. Zipeng: literally, purple roc.
3. A Chinese idiom, a weasel giving new year's greetings to a hen has ulterior motives.

Volume I Chapter 12

It hadn't even been a month since Cheng Qian was initiated into the Fuyao Sect, and he already ran into the biggest crisis of his life – he, as the apprentice of a weasel, with his narcissistic, presumptuous and sissy first senior brother, as well as his artful and cunning second senior brother, was going to rescue his fourth junior brother, who might have been eaten down to bones, from a henroost.

What if the Hen Zhenren wouldn't release him?

And what if their fourth junior brother had already been served on someone's plate by the time they arrived.

Cheng Qian contemplated the talisman in his hand. Their master threw it to them right after he finished carving it, giving no information about what it was for and how to use it. But first senior brother just took it and left without asking. Did he know that already?

Cheng Qian hesitated to believe that first senior brother actually knew anything besides incense. Thus he braced himself up for Yan Zhengming's imaginable mockery and asked modestly, "Senior Brother, do you know what this talisman is for?"

"Summoning lightning." Replied Yan Zhengming without even thinking.

Getting such a direct answer, Cheng Qian breathed a sigh of relief. First senior brother seemed very self-assured and confident, so that must be it; he did have energy feel, and systematically learned about charms after all.

It was pitiful, but if Cheng Qian knew how conceited his first senior brother was, he wouldn't have felt relieved so early – the truth was that Yan Zhengming only took a brief glance at the charms, and got a rough idea that it resembled the lightning-summoning charms, which he replied to Cheng Qian assertively.

Yan Zhengming had little patience to routinely sit and learn those boring charms. He only memorized the rough shapes of some familiar charms perfunctorily, just for the sake of satisfying his master's examinations. He had no concept of what "a small discrepancy can lead to a great error" meant in the art of charms.

Soon enough, they arrived at the back of the mountain. Cheng Qian aside, the other two knew the way very well.

There was a precipitous cliff. Through the apertures between the rocks, they could see the abyss down there and hear a sinister wind gusting up.

Cheng Qian couldn't resist looking down, after which his heart twanged like a giant elastic band. It was too high and too deep. He had never been somewhere so dangerous, his face suddenly blanched. But after he caught his breath, he was somehow attracted by the spectacular abyss. Holding back the feeling of nausea, Cheng Qian gulped, craned his neck, and took another look down cautiously.

Perhaps due to him normally being overly observant and proper, Cheng Qian found for the first time, that he was somewhat fond of such a perilous place near the abyss.

“What are you looking at? Do you want to be smashed into a flat meat pie?” Seeing Cheng Qian almost stretching his upper body hazardously, Yan Zhengming clenched his shoulder and pulled him back vigorously.

Yan Zhengming was very puzzled on why these brats all had the inclination to dice with death. He couldn’t help recollecting that when he was their age, he behaved himself and never played up. Could it be that the kids master brought back this time were both freaks?

Certainly, “delicate” young master Yan never roughhoused, he couldn’t even stir himself to walk to the morning classes and would like to be carried over instead. There was no trouble that was tempting enough to entice him.

By now, they could already hear the sound of water. Yan Zhengming rubbed the mud off his shoes onto a big rock with an inexplicably hateful expression, as if it was the greatest sacrilege in the world that his shoes were muddled.

After that, he turned to Li Yun and glared at him. “We’re almost there. This way.”

This young master was spoiled to the point of being unruly. He never concealed a ghost of his emotions and just displayed them very explicitly on the face. Cheng Qian felt malice, contempt and loathing from first senior

brother's glare, as if it was saying "Aren't you dying to see what the cave looks like? Now your wish has come true. Have a good look then."

Li Yun's face went chalk white. Seeing that, Cheng Qian started deliberating over what he should do to put down the fire if senior brothers got into a fight, as he was so little and trivial.

Quite unexpectedly, however, Li Yun remained as mute as a fish. He willingly accepted being treated like a doormat for the time being, as if the more Yan Zhengming was sarcastic to him, the better he would feel.

Yan Zhengming shot him a ferocious stare, and led them to the pond on the top of the hill and stood by.

"Can you both swim?" Asked Yan Zhengming. But immediately he said to himself before the other two could reply, "It doesn't matter if you can't. Hold your breath and stay close to me. Don't flap about when you're in the water."

Finishing that, Yan Zhengming caught hold of Cheng Qian by his wrist with a very disgusted and loath expression, as though being forced to touch dog shit.

Cheng Qian had never touched such a hand, which was cared more meticulously than anyone else's he had seen – even better than that of the maid's, who combed first senior brother's hair. There were only a few unnoticeable calluses on the parts which he used to hold a sword and

writing brush, yet they weren't very thick. So you could see that this guy wasn't hard-working at all.

Apart from that, there wasn't a half, let alone a single, agnail on his hands.

But soon after, Cheng Qian was dragged into the water by this beautiful, fair hand.

The water was bone-chilling, and Cheng Qian nearly choked. Their jumps created many foams and splashes, making it difficult to find the direction. Clinging to the tablet in his bosom, Cheng Qian was drawn forward by Yan Zhengming.

Soon, a huge rock got in their way.

Yan Zhengming pulled over Cheng Qian's sleeve and used it as a cleaning cloth to wipe the moss and waterweed off the rock, and a small figure of the Big Dipper exposed itself. Yan Zhengming felt the part around the head of the dipper, then pressed somewhere with his thumb.

If you were familiar with horoscopes, you would know the place Yan Zhengming pressed was where the Dubhe¹ was. Suddenly, the stone gate rumbled open. Cheng Qian was nearly washed away by the surging torrent. He held tight to the gate with hands and feet, and pounced forward with all his might.

But presently, Cheng Qian was surprised to find that he was standing on the ground.

There was a narrow aisle behind the stone gate, which cleaved through the water deep to the earth. The water seemed to be cut off by something invisible and intangible, and thus the aisle was like a transparent tube sticking underwater. Water drops slid down Cheng Qian's body and reunited with the rest; sprays were blocked outside and therefore wouldn't splash.

Under their feet were stone steps which just allowed one person at a time, winding down to the deep of the valley.

Yan Zhengming carried his garish sword in hand. Apparently he didn't want to rile someone, as he kept the sword in its scabbard even though he was already on the alert.

The stone steps seemed endless. It became unbearably cold and dark as they went deeper.

Having remained mute all the way, Li Yun finally couldn't restrain himself anymore and asked, "He... How on earth did little junior brother come down here? I don't think he had the nerve to come somewhere so deep alone."

That was Cheng Qian's doubt too. As to his knowledge, that loser was even afraid of dogs, he definitely didn't have such valorous spirit of exploration, even for the sake of energy feel.

"Rubbish. In the evening of the first and fifteenth days, thousands of monsters worship the moon, and the stone gate opens wide. The valley is

definitely not the same as what you see now.” Said first senior brother wearing a condescending face. “Think twice before you say stupid things.”

His words smacked each of his junior brothers in the face and reduced them to silence.

All of a sudden, Yan Zhengming came to a halt, which caught Cheng Qian flat-footed. Cheng Qian ran into him in an unguarded moment.

Cheng Qian’s height barely reached Yan Zhengming’s chest. So Yan Zhengming stuck out his hand and stopped Cheng Qian without much effort.

The perfume of orchid on first senior brother’s body, which was so strong that even the cold water failed to dilute it, stifled Cheng Qian and made him want to sneeze. Afterwards, he heard a hissing sound. Looking down, he found that his dirtied and smeared sleeve was ripped off by first senior brother.

And first senior brother said with righteous distaste, “Why are you still wearing that? Isn’t it sloppy enough?”

As if it wasn’t he that dirtied Cheng Qian’s sleeve!

Being made to be a “cut-sleeve”², Cheng Qian suddenly felt his first senior brother wasn’t like a young girl at all – should such an impudent girl really exist in the world, by no means could she be married off in the future.

Before they noticed it, the end of the steps was reached. Right in front of them was the mouth of a cave which was taller than two adults. The door which was supposed to be shut tight was wide open, exposing an eerie and gloomy corner inside.

“Strange.” Yan Zhengming breathed. “Didn’t Zipeng Zhenren close the door?”

Human beings and monsters were totally different. Yan Zhengming personally hated hairy beasts and feathery birds; and to put himself in the monster’s place, he didn’t think a feather-less human being would be welcome here. The cave wasn’t originally a comfortable place, and the abnormality today even disquieted the inattentive Yan Zhengming.

After a second of hesitation, Yan Zhengming walked in and was greeted by a gust of sweet fragrance. Yet still, he sensed a faint hint of blood with his acute nose.

There was a chicken feather engraved on the stone wall. But right now, the imprint was very blurry and fading, with its tail being almost invisible. It could be easily inferred without any common sense that the owner of this imprint wasn’t in a good situation. But the problem was... whether she was approaching the end of her predestined lifespan or badly injured by someone.

Zipeng Zhenren was a super monster that had vast magic powers with the deposits of over eight hundred years’ cultivation. Normally, they shouldn’t

have sneaked in so easily without arousing her vigilance. To play it safe, Yan Zhengming kept quiet.

He turned around and made a gesture of “hush” at his pesky junior brothers. Then he crept to the front of a locked inner stone door, and twiddled a knob on the surface gingerly.

Halfway through it, he paused as if something occurred to him. Then he hissed at Li Yun and Cheng Qian angrily, “Keep back! Can’t you see what I am doing, or you want to stand there and be live targets?”

Cheng Qian and Li Yun immediately backed sideways.

Yan Zhengming gave the knob a few turns until it couldn’t be twiddled.

Squeak.

The stone gate let out a hoarse moan, which was so creepy that Cheng Qian got goose bumps all over his arms. A strong smell of blood overpowered him, and promptly, he heard an ominous sound of wind. But before he was able to alert his senior brothers, he caught a peep of sword light out of the corner of his eye.

It was first senior brother drawing his sword, a real, incisive sword, which glinted so brightly that it was almost burning. A current of raw air was mobilized by him, whirling and eddying in the pokey cave.

Unfortunately, the negligible power of a young man was absolutely ridiculous in the big monster’s eyes, just like an ant trying to shake a giant

tree. Before Yan Zhengming could draw out his sword, he felt some emphatic press on it and the part between his thumb and the index finger fell to shaking badly. In no case could his well-preserved hands withstand such a pain as if they were being torn apart. He did a double-take when he loosed his grip on the sword in spite of himself.

Clank.

The sword dropped onto the ground. Yan Zhengming doddered backwards for several steps and his hand holding the sword just now had gone numb.

The three lads looked at the ground in astonishment and saw that lying beside the coldly-glinting sword was a feather which had knocked it into the air.

Horrible stillness began to grow. Cheng Qian could see first senior brother's face had gone ghastly.

After quite a while, Yan Zhengming dusted the dirt off his body, and said frowning, "Yan Zhengming, junior of Fuyao Sect, comes to send his greetings to Zipeng Zhenren under his master's order."

1. Dubhe: see [here](#).

2. cut-sleeve: an allusion to gay. Here's its source:

Emperor Ai of Han Dynasty was sleeping in the daytime with Dong Xian, his male lover, stretched out across his sleeve. When the emperor wanted to get up, Dong Xian was still

asleep. Because he did not want to disturb him, the emperor cut off his own sleeve and got up

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The response of the person in the cave was a thundering roar which boomed in their ears. Cheng Qian suddenly felt his chest tighten, as well as some disgust that almost made him vomit.

Through the aftersound, he struggled to recognize what she said.

A concise and wrathful “Scram!”

That was an aged woman’s voice, rough and gravelly with a tinge of gruesome viciousness, highly resembling the image of an old hag, who fed on humans and kept their hearts, from folklore.

Kneading his ears, Cheng Qian was unsure about which words enraged her, “Fuyao Sect” or “his master”?

Didn’t first senior brother say he paid her a new-year visit? Did he bow to her at a distance of three [Li1](#) back then?

Surprised and bewildered, Cheng Qian glanced over his shoulder at Yan Zhengming.

To be honest, Cheng Qian and Li Yun, one thought a great deal of himself, and the other had a rich stock of wicked ideas. But they did have one thing in common – neither of them acknowledged their first senior brother as something.

But judging from the current situation, they had to agree that in the event they had to fight, first senior brother was the only person they could barely count on.

He was the oldest and the tallest, and he had learned swordplay for the longest time; on top of that, he had energy feel.

Too bad the strongest man's sword hadn't even been unsheathed when the old monster's mere feather sent it into the air.

Yan Zhengming looked livid. Beads of cold sweat broke out on his temples and were running down his cheeks. For the sake of decency or something, he didn't withdraw even a half step, and moreover, he even forced a haughty smile.

...

Even though he was gallant, Cheng Qian preferred him not to smile. Because his smile always made Cheng Qian want to slap him with the sole of his shoe, and if that smile angered the big monster, they would be absolutely screwed.

"Since Zhenren is unwilling to meet guests, we as juniors shouldn't have visited. But last night, a thoughtless disciple stumbled into the valley and has been missing for a whole night." After a pause to make himself sound more justified, Yan Zhengming continued, "According to my master, seniors in the cave have been neighboring our sect ever since it was founded, and we've been at peace all these years. Senior, you are the bigger person, you surely don't want to hurt the harmony between both sides just because of a little kid, do you?"

Although his statement wasn't very fluent, it still inspired wonder in Cheng Qian.

For one thing, Cheng Qian didn't expect that the first senior brother who couldn't even remain seated, had the guts to reason with a big monster. For another, he discovered that this young master wasn't untactful, but he simply preferred to be constantly indulged on master's love.

Nevertheless, his reasonable lengthy speech touched Cheng Qian, yet it failed to persuade the hen inside. Zipeng Zhenren's reply remained the same, the single word, "Scram!"

Yan Zhengming almost bursted with anger, but he suppressed it – although embarrassed, he didn't get into a huff on the spot.

Young master Yan was only headstrong, but he didn't like asking for trouble. Any fifteen or sixteen year old teenager, as long as he wasn't a complete dunce, would be able to distinguish between those he could afford to provoke and those he couldn't.

It wouldn't take more effort for Zipeng Zhenren to kill them, than to trample several ants. Yan Zhengming gritted his teeth while feeling really confused and agitated. He did make dealings with this old hen on his master's behalf before. Although she didn't have a good temper, she wouldn't lower herself to the same level as several mortal youngsters either.

Even if Zipeng Zhenren was very lukewarm on her treatment, she had never snapped at him.

A conclusion flashed into Yan Zhengming's head: something terrible had happened inside.

At that moment, Li Yun murmured from behind, "Senior Brother, since she won't let us in, how... how about going back to bring master here?"

In face of Zipeng Zhenren, Yan zhengming didn't dare to be rash. But to deal with his dipshit junior brother, he wouldn't show mercy.

Young master Yan answered off the top of his head, "It took us nearly an hour to come here, and now you ask us to return and bring master. Do you mean to bring him to identify your little junior brother's body?"

Li Yun shuddered in cold sweat, his forehead was feeling dry by the sinister blowing wind. Once again, he had one foot in the trap of cowardice. Considering they were confronting a real monster – a monster who didn't welcome them, it was already hard enough for Li Yun to not stand on his knees.

But Han Yuan...

A hole was forming on Li Yun's conscience. He wavered for a long time and eventually said sorely, "But we couldn't even get inside, and how do we fight with those monsters in there? I... I mean, fourth junior brother entered here last night and master said he was still safe; maybe we don't need to hurry now, we can..."

Standing in front of the cave which was dripping with the smell of blood, actually Yan Zhegming was also secretly trembling. Meanwhile, he was internally furious because of Zipeng Zhenren's incivility. So he was in an awkward situation, in which he came close to losing his temper while trembling with fear.

But once Li Yun spoke, the balance was easily broken.

Yan Zhengming's fear was overpassed by his fury at Li Yun's remarks. He doubled the embitterment he got from the hen and took it all out on Li Yun.

"Li Yun, what should I say about you?" Yan Zhengming sneered. "You are really something."

Cheng Qian knew that he had to declare his position, so he picked up first senior brother's sword, walked to his side and said to Li Yun, "Second Senior Brother, you can go back alone."

Having received support, Yan Zhengming's sneer grew even more revolting. He was really good at cynical smiles. With an arch lift of his

eyebrow and a squint, he didn't even need to humph and people at a distance of three Zhang2 would perceive his scorn.

"A little kid is better than you." Yan Zhengming said. Then he turned to Cheng Qian, whose name escaped him again. "Little... um, li... little Copper Coin3, come with me."

Zipeng Zhenren could only repeat "scram" again and again, perhaps she was only a sheep in wolf's clothing. Maybe her freedom was restrained or she was just terribly injured and couldn't move – otherwise it was totally unnecessary for that old hen to block them outside the door.

For the sake of not letting the little underbite4 become the stuffing for dumplings at some big monster's dinner, Yan Zhengming decided to gatecrash.

Cheng Qian followed up and said with resignation, "Senior Brother, I am Cheng Qian, not Copper Coin."

First senior brother sniggered, probably to show there was no difference between "Tong Qian" and "Cheng Qian" to him. He took his own sword over and said to Cheng Qian with his chin slightly up, "Although master is not here, you've got his water-summoning charm in hand. I don't believe we cannot flood this shabby cave!"

Hearing that, Cheng Qian nearly fell flat on his face – wa... wasn't that a lightning-summoning charm? How did it change to a water-summoning charm?

Do the charms of our sect have special powers and can arbitrarily change their property between Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth5?

Then Cheng Qian's eyes fell upon first senior brother's hand holding the sword, and was surprised that it was constantly shivering.

“Very good. Even though first senior brother was almost scared silly, he didn’t forget to bluff.” Cheng Qian thought despairingly.

The two lads had a good measure of themselves. So they were only posing as heroes, but actually in a cold sweat.

Right at this moment, the wind blew again.

When Yan Zhengming was panic-stricken with veins bulging on the back of his hand, the stone gate slowly opened inward with a creak.

Unbelievable!

That old hen believed first senior brother’s bluster!

It was easy for Cheng Qian as he had been accustomed to putting on an act, whereas it took Yan Zhengming tremendous effort to uncurl his lips that were ready to curve jauntily. He pretended to be dusting himself and gracefully wiped the sweat in his hands on his clothes. With eyebrows dancing, he said, “Thanks, Senior.”

Li Yun didn’t know what happened and was awed by senior and junior brothers’ courage. Seeing that they left him and walked in, he didn’t know what to do. He was very scared, but he couldn’t flee either. After some hesitation, he finally got enough courage and ran in.

On the other side of the stone gate was an abode. There wasn’t a men-eating old hag but a giant bird paralysed in the corner.

In fact, it wasn’t an “old” hen. It had feathers as gorgeous as a phoenix’s, however, they were withering away while spread on the ground dully. A blurry image of a woman was hanging over the giant bird’s head. Although her voice was hoarse, she didn’t look aged. Judging only by her appearance, she was probably in the bloom of youth.

Looking at the tablet in Cheng Qian's hand, Zipeng asked, "Whose charms? Present it to me."

Yan Zhengming was about to bullshit to fool her when Zipeng Zhenren snapped, "Shut up, you whelp! You really think your petty tricks can deceive me? Give it to me!"

Immediately Cheng Qian felt himself being sucked, and before he reacted, he was walking to the giant bird involuntarily. Yan Zhengming reached out his hand to stop him, and Cheng Qian's chest crashed into first senior brother's elbow. He couldn't help letting go of the tablet. The white handkerchief fell onto the ground and the tablet flew over to Zipeng Zhenren.

As the proverb says, "A starved camel is still larger than a horse." Only now did Yan Zhengming realize that even though his guess was right on the button, that Zipeng Zhenren was badly injured, it remained a piece of cake for her to kill them all.

When she reached a hand out of nowhere to catch the tablet, a strong light bursted out in the dark cave. None of the three lads saw what happened as they all closed their eyes out of their own accord. They heard a scream and when they opened their eyes again, the tablet was lying on the ground.

Zipeng Zhenren seemed to be shocked. The image became weaker and recoiled fearfully as it mumbled, "No, it's not your master... it... it's lord... Lord Beiming⁶!"

1. Li: a unit of length, equivalent to 500 meters.
2. Zhang: a unit of length, equal to 10/3 meters.
3. the pronunciation of "copper coin" is "Tong Qian" in Chinese, similar to "Cheng Qian".

4. underbite: here it refers to Han Yuan.
5. the five-element theory of Chinese philosophy: see [here](#).
6. Beiming: it literally means “the dark sea in the north where the sunlight can’t reach

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Cheng Qian was new to the cultivation world, and Yan Zhengming was useless. Therefore, they exchanged doubtful glances, not knowing who Lord Beiming was.

Then, Li Yun who finally got out of his stupor spoke.

His voice was as low as the buzz of a mosquito. “Lord Beiming is not a person... According to legend, Beiming is a deep and boundlessly dark sea. So a master of demonic magic is often compared to ‘Beiming’. With time, it became a honorable title that every demonic cultivator fights for – Senior Zipeng, this charm was carved by my master – there’s still sawdust on it – not by some Lord Beiming.”

“What is a master of demonic magic?” Asked Cheng Qian quietly.

“The best among demonic cultivators... the archdevil?” Answered Yan Zhengming unsurely.

From what he has seen so far, Cheng Qian didn’t deem his master as an “archdevil”. But on second thought, he felt it might be true... from the perspective of a hen.

“Bullshit!” Exclaimed Zipeng Zhenren angrily.

Then she turned to Cheng Qian. Pointing at him, the hazy image in the air said rudely, “Boy, come here.”

Cheng Qian was just going to speak when Yan Zhengming stopped him.

Yan Zhengming shook his head at him, advanced, and said to Zipeng, “Senior, my junior brother is still new here. He hasn’t even memorized the

sect rules yet. I'm afraid he may offend you. If you need anything, you come for me."

Yan Zhengming might be tall, but his body was still the one of a thin and weak teenager. Observing him from behind, Cheng Qian pursed his lips, and for the first time, felt that first senior brother was not a good-for-nothing as he had imagined.

"I want him! None of your business!" Zipeng fulminated.

Yan Zhengming frowned. Cheng Qian whispered to him in a haste, "Senior Brother, it's okay."

With that, he walked forward against the strong ominous aura from the monster and heard Zipeng Zhenren order, "Pick that talisman up."

Cheng Qian stopped and picked it up. The instant he touched the tablet, he felt the tyrannical power in it. There was seemingly a fierce beast jailed inside. But that beast probably recognized Cheng Qian, as it gradually tamed and the blaze faded. The tablet in his hand reverted to a peaceful state.

For a second, while Cheng Qian was holding the tablet, the fear of facing the bossy monster miraculously waned a lot and a thought popped into his head: "When can I have such dominating power that allows me to fly between the heaven and the earth, go anywhere as I wish, instead of jittering before an old monster?"

Contemplating the charm, Zipeng's expression changed several times. After a while, her tone eased up a little. "You came looking for your junior brother? Let's make a deal. I will give back the guy that strayed in here, if you bring me something I want. There's a Celestial Platform in the Demon Valley. Monsters are not allowed to enter as it has restrictive spells, but

humans can. The thing I want is there.”

Her claim didn’t hold water. The eight-hundred-year-old monster had apparently taken the three lads as little birds that were easily fooled.

But she failed, because these three were not birds, they were human beings. They thought the same, “Bah, nonsense.”

After winking and frowning at one another, Yan Zhengming made the final decision – get into the Demon Valley first.

Regarding how to deal with her when they came back... young master Yan didn’t think much of it. Considering the old hen’s situation, it was likely she would kick the bucket soon.

They bundled off. Yan Zhengming even plucked a feather from Zipeng Zhenren’s abode with his nimble fingers upon leaving.

Once outside the cave, they were surrounded by water again, it was very shallow this time though. They swam across to the shore quickly and arrived at their neighborhood – Demon Valley.

Landing on the ground, Yan Zhengming pinned that chicken feather on Li Yun’s chest and said, “In ancient times, there was a story where a fox assumed the majesty of the tiger; today we have an asshole assuming the majesty of an old hen. Look how fainthearted you are, you may as well wear that to boost your courage – think hard how to find that poor underbite, we have to get back before sunset!”

A twinge of fear went through Li Yun. He asked Yan Zhengming anxiously, “First Senior Brother, does the Demon Valley have any other taboos related to when it gets dark?”

“I mean I have to go back to have a bath, my feet are stuck to my shoes by the mud. You idiot!” Yan Zhengming snarled.

Cheng Qian: “...”

He could tell that first senior brother wasn't joking. His malevolent face looked as if he was really going to chop his feet off – were it not because one could only have a sole pair of feet in his whole life, presumably he would have done do that without blinking an eye.

Li Yun knew a variety of little tricks. Under the pressure from his first senior brother, he pondered for a bit while nibbling his finger. Luckily, he didn't let first senior brother down and came up with an idea.

He produced a small bottle from his bosom, which Cheng Qian found familiar.

“Isn't this the feet-washing water of the toads?” Cheng Qian blurted.

Holding his masterpiece and broken heart, Li Yun gave him a complaining look. “Junior Brother, this is magic water, Toad Liquid.”

He dropped three drops on a small stone and turned it into a frisky toad. Whether because first senior brother was afraid of that or simply because it revolted him, his expression was even worse than when his sword was knocked off by Zipeng Zhenren. He stared at it with awful abhorrence.

Cheng Qian kind of saw how his senior brothers fell foul of each other.

“Go find Han Yuan.” Ordered Li Yun.

The toad croaked and hopped forward.

Li Yun signalled them to keep up and explained, “To tell you the truth, Toad Liquid is a mixture of toads’ urine and Five Deadly Venoms¹. Several drops are enough to turn a small object like a leaf, a piece of paper, or a stone, into a toad. Little junior brother played for a long time the other day, with one that was changed from a leaf. His body and clothes should have picked up the same smell, so it should be able to find him.”

Yan Zhengming freaked out. “Do you mean he hasn’t changed clothes, or you mean he hasn’t bathed since a few days ago? Is he still a fucking human?”

Hearing the formula of Toad Liquid, Cheng Qian felt sick. “Second Senior Brother, you don’t need to detail that.”

The toads piss had limited effect. That little toad hopped only for two or three Zhang before it turned back to a stone. Li Yun had to use the liquid again. He sighed, “This can only last for a short while as it’s not a real charm, but something that is only for fun. I only have this bottle left. I’m afraid we will have to be careful with its expenditure to find little junior brother.”

When Li Yun said that, he was looking at the bouncing toad with a tender and almost wistful expression. Cheng Qian shivered, he felt that second junior brother might not be an ordinary person.

The toad took a break after every jump. At this speed, it guided them through the increasingly luxuriant forest. But abruptly, the vivacious toad fell on his back with its limbs twitching.

Yan Zhengming picked up a three-Chi-long stick from the ground, covered his nose with his sleeve, and poked the toad from a distance. Then he wondered, “Did he finally die due to being ashamed of his very existence?”

With an appalled croak, the toad turned back to a stone. And even after Li Yun dripped “magic water” on it, it wouldn’t come alive.

Li Yun scratched his head in embarrassment. “Umm...”

“Hush!” A look of vigilance flashed across Yan Zhengming’s face.

He lurched to his feet, dropped the stick, and drew out his sword towards the dense forest beside him.

Bodeful rustlings sounded from the forest, followed by a roar which brought a human-headed but beast-bodied monstrous bear to the presence of the three.

That monster was much taller than two adults with a big bull head. You could see its iron teeth when it opened its mouth, and smell a filthy bloody odor effusing from it at a distance of several Li. A shake of its fist accompanied his appearance, which casted a big tree away.

Yan Zhengming pushed Li Yun and shouted, “What are you about here? Run!”

Li Yun froze, he couldn’t move a step. At this critical moment, the tablet in Cheng Qian’s bosom became warm. They simultaneously heard a man’s voice.

“Don’t move.” That man said very calmly.

“Who?” Yan Zhengming swung around.

“Don’t be scared, come over here.” That voice sounded again.

This time, they all heard it. The voice came from Cheng Qian’s direction,

but they couldn't see the speaker. Then something seemed to strike Cheng Qian as he lowered his sight on the tablet slowly.

“S... speaking charms?” Li Yun goggled.

The charm seemed to be amused by him. It said comfortably, with a softer tone, “It’s nothing but two or three small monsters. They won’t hurt you, trust me.”

However, he had hardly finished his words when that mountainous bear spirit dashed towards them. Wherever the “small monster” passed, it shook the ground. No wonder that timid toad played possum!

The three two-legged lads were absolutely not as fast as the big beast. It was already too late for them to run now. However, it never rains but pours. Another shrill roar sounded somewhere near.

The next scene they saw was that a colorful snake twined its tail around the bear’s waist, and the mountainous bear was tossed upward into the sky precipitously, then bashed onto the ground, creating a deep hole in the earth. Those ancient trees and flowers around all met with disaster, flattened and ravaged.

It happened so fast that first senior brother was even deprived of time to mind the mud splashed on his white clothes.

Two small monsters? No matter how rare a speaking talisman was, the three lads all felt that he just said it too easily because it was not his own business.

Indeed, the tablet wouldn’t die!

Later, the snake monster revealed its complete appearance. The upper part

of its face was human's, while the under part was covered with scales and was rattling abuzz. As it moved, an even stronger bloody wind gusted. It wriggled through the ravaged forest so fast that only ghostly images were left. Cheng Qian could only hear the hissing noise of its scales against the ground, but couldn't see where its head was –

Until it bit into the bear's neck. The steaming blood spouted three Zhang to the air, forming a blood fountain.

With mortal terror on its face which almost evolved to a human's, the bear spirit came crashing down in a minute. Its huge body rolled and twitched desperately on the ground, moribund. While the snake coiled around it tightly and rolled about with it.

In death throes and mournful cries, the bear died.

Cheng Qian looked right into its leaden unfocused eyes, feeling like his chest was jammed with ice cubes.

The snake loosened its tie around the bear and retreated. Cheng Qian thought it was going to check whether its prey was seriously dead. But the snake suddenly bolted into the bear spirit's body. Its head impaled the body's abdomen like a sharp blade. Then it spurted out with a beast core in its mouth and extended its upper body which was one and a half Zhang long.

Li Yun vomited. He could hardly believe that he'd been a neighbor with such creatures for more than a year, and he had made several attempts to explore here in the first and fifteenth night.

Yan Zhengming felt the blood in his heart pumping frantically into every corner of his body, which set him in a daze. His feet seemed to lose strength. If his sword wasn't supporting him, he would have collapsed on

the dirt.

Facing the bloody ground, with his heart pounding, Cheng Qian fixed his eyes on the dead bear and the munching snake. Once again, an inexpressible feeling welled up in his heart.

If he had such absolute strength, would he also... have the power of life and death over other beings?

1. Five Deadly Venoms: namely, the venom of the centipede, the snake, the scorpion, the lizard, and the toad

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Just then, the snake moved. It crawled sinuously towards them.

Its long tail swept those ancient trees, cutting through the small forest. Wherever it went, was followed by a trail of destruction. Trees which were so thick that one could barely get their arms around, were all toppled down.

With one hand squeezing Cheng Qian's shoulder, the other lifting his sword, and his arm holding Li Yun who could scarcely stand, Yan Zhengming thought wearily, "What the fuck should I do?"

While his feet was still feeling like jelly, his head had already cooled down. He knew they stood no chance in escaping right now. But at the very thought that they would be torn into shreds and die in the beast's mouth, he felt a spasm of dizziness.

In a flash, this lousy imagination made him determine to leave life and death out of consideration. Miraculously, his hand holding the sword stopped quaking. He resolved that no matter what happened, he was going to fight to death with it. At least he should slice two scales off, and when he was drained, he would kill himself – better than suffering the torment of the filthy smell from its mouth before closing his eyes.

At the border of life and death, those sword moves that he failed to integrate for the past few years were now swelling like tides in his mind, linking together in such a magical way that the snake seemed to decelerate significantly in his eyes.

Yan Zhengming twisted his wrist and aimed firmly at the huge snake's eye.

The first stab, he must not miss it.

The snake monster was getting closer and closer. For a second, Yan Zhengming stopped breathing –

... But then, the snake passed them by.

The swinging serpent's tail narrowly missed Cheng Qian's ankle by less than the length of a palm, and it just went straight into another direction emitting a terrible rustling sound, as if it didn't see them.

The three boys kept their postures unchanged for a good while until someone's abnormal heartbeats broke the silence. They just had a brush with death.

Yan Zhengming withdrew himself from the highly-focused state and only then slowly hung down his sword. For a while, he felt as if his limbs weighted hundreds of Jin¹ and he could barely support himself. His back was soaked in cold sweats that were coursing all the way down his spine to his waist.

Staring at his sword, Yan Zhengming was amazed that he gained an insight in that emergency.

If Muchun Zhenren knew about this, he would definitely sigh that he didn't teach young master Yan according to his characteristics. If he had placed a lumpy toad on the desk while he practiced charms, which would lick young master Yan's hand every time he got distracted, his cultivation level would have probably improved in leaps and bounds.

At this time, the tablet spoke again, with a very breezy attitude. "I've told you, with me, you don't have to fear such small monsters."

Its voice rang a bell with Cheng Qian. He took a puzzled look at the tablet in his hand, but failed to recall where he had heard it.

He thrust the tablet into first senior brother's hand, who hadn't come back to earth yet. Then he carried his nonaggressive wooden sword and walked to the front of the bear's body.

Yan Zhengming hadn't dried off yet and began to sweat again when he saw this bold cub climbing up the bear's body with both hands and feet. He hissed, "What are you doing? Get down!"

Cheng Qian waved his hand at him without even looking back, and then reached his target successfully – a "sword" hanging on the bear's waist, made of some beast's sharp fang. That tooth was a good two Chi long, with a hole in the end so it would be convenient to hold. Its tip was as sharp as a knife and was glinting with dim light, perhaps with venom on it.

The tooth was so large that the short Cheng Qian was holding it as if it was a behemoth. The chillily shining blade reflected his serious face, and there was still ominous blood of its former owner on it.

Under Yan Zhengming's and Li Yun's astonished gaze, Cheng Qian abandoned his wooden sword for the new one with an impassive expression.

He jumped down from that corpse and tried wielding it with both hands, but felt it was too long and heavy, not very convenient. He stabbed forward with a total lack of inhibition, and poof! Its tip stuck into the thick fur freely without any obstruction as if he was cutting vegetables.

Only then was Cheng Qian satisfied – in spite of its unwieldiness, it was incisive enough.

Li Yun muttered, "Third Junior Brother... what breed of guy is he?"

Yan Zhengming laughed dryly, no knowing what to reply.

Although the serpent, which had turned a blind eye to them just now, proved that the tablet did have some effects, Cheng Qian didn't want pin their safety entirely on that thing.

Only when he was holding this heavy tooth would he have a sense of real security.

One monster died, and the other left. There was no danger around for the time being. When Li Yun dripped "magic water" on that useless stone, naturally the toad became alive and kicking again, and continued to guide them forward happily.

Along the way, Yan Zhengming tried to talk to that tablet several times. But it suddenly became dumb and wouldn't answer any of his questions.

Until the toad led them to the top of a hill.

With only one peep down from the top of the hill, the toad was aghast. Then it played the same old trick and overturned itself on the ground, pretending to be dead again.

Li Yun caught up. At a simple glance, he understood why.

He instinctively turned to run and bumped into Cheng Qian, almost causing them to roll down the hill together.

Cheng Qian's small back badly hit a rock, the fang almost fell out of his hand. He was knocked dizzy by Li Yun and said suppressing the howl of pain, "Second Senior Brother, if you want to go with your toad, don't pull me along!"

Li Yun collared Cheng Qian, lips shaking so heavily that he couldn't speak. Cheng Qian only then realised something was wrong. Looking up at Yan Zhengming's equally frozen figure, he inquired, "What's wrong?"

Standing where the toad died in the line of its duty, Yan Zhengming felt that the whole world was upside down – in the valley down the hill, there were hundreds of thousands of monsters fighting heatedly: flying birds and running beasts, human-headed and beast-bodied monsters, blood dying the ground, flesh flying up and down – it was like a slaughterhouse. In contrast, the huge bear and long snake just now... were really only two small monsters.

Eventually, the tablet uttered, “Don’t look. If that was real, the sound and the bloody smell would have already spread to the other side of the mountain. Is it possible that you didn’t notice it until you climbed up here?”

His words slapped those silly boys out of their shock. After a more careful look, they found there were some blurs in the scene in the valley.

Li Yun breathed a sigh of relief and asked almost eagerly, “Senior, are they all false?”

“This valley is called Mirror Valley, it reflects the scene of somewhere else. Of course they are all real, although it is not happening here.” The tablet chuckled.

He sounded very nonchalant, as if he had seen plenty of bloodshed and death, which set the lads on their guard.

They winked at one another without uttering a sound, while the tablet seemed to not notice their nervousness and continued, “Pass through the valley and over that mountain ahead, you will see the Celestial Platform. The scene in the Mirror Valley takes place somewhere near it. You only have to send me there, then you can go find your little junior brother.”

“We are here for that little underbite, not to commit suicide together – what the hell are you?” Said Yan Zhengming dryly.

At that, a cloud of white smoke rose from the tablet, and when it cleared, an image of their long-necked and small-headed master showed up, so vivid that it looked like Muchun Zhenren himself was here.

But seeing his acquainted weasel master, Yan Zhengming didn't show a kinder look. Instead, he threw the tablet on the ground, pointed his sword at it, and barked, "How dare you masquerade as my master!"

Being scolded like that, "master" didn't get angry but smiled, eyes crinkling. Then by a sudden metamorphosis, it changed to a nebulous black shadow, taking the shape of a mushroom.

"I will not be your master then – but I was carved by your master himself." That "mushroom" said gently. "Xiao-Zhengming, even if you do not trust me, don't you trust your master?"

Seeing Yan Zhengming hesitating, the "mushroom" resumed, "Besides, Xiao-Yun's toad has led you here, which means Xiao-Yuan is right in front. So we're going the same way, right?"

Yan Zhengming looked down to see the direction to which the toad was heading before it died, and thought, "Since we're already here, it's too ridiculous if we back down now, and what if Han Yuan is really in the front?"

Out of absolute trust in his master, Yan Zhengming put his sword down together with the doubt in his mind. He stooped to pick up the tablet and said impatiently, "You lead the way."

The tablet led them all the way down to the Mirror Valley. Even though they were well aware that it was only mirages around them, it was still a torment to travel under the claws and teeth of those monsters, which made this path seem awfully long. Cheng Qian thought that after this experience,

those ghost stories about “haunted deserted villages at night” and “heart-gouging ghosts” couldn’t horrify him any more.

Cheng Qian couldn’t resist asking, “What on earth is going on here?”

“The Heavenly Monster is coming into the world. Its descension robbed the Monster King of his powers. Demonic cultivators don’t value allegiance, once the Monster King gets weak, they will seize the chance to rebel and usurp the throne.” Answered the tablet unhurriedly.

“What humiliation!” Cheng Qian thought.

But then, thinking of the rude Zipeng Zhenren and the snake monster that silently killed a bear to take its core, he felt that demonic cultivators deserved to be called beasts. They were all unreasonable and did not follow moral principles. Looking at it this way, it seemed excusable that they rebelled disloyally.

“Since it’s an institution for demonic cultivators, why are you going to the Celestial Platform? To watch the fighting scene?” Asked Yan Zhengming.

This time, the “mushroom” in the tablet adopted a stern countenance. “It’s already inauspicious for the Heavenly Monster to see blood at its birth, if this slaughter is not quelled, I’m afraid the Heavenly Monster will be born to be bloodthirsty and bring disaster to Fuyao Mountain. I have to stop that before the disaster is sealed.”

Feeling foggy, Yan Zhengming pursued, “What do you mean?”

But the tablet just shuffled away the subject as if it didn’t hear his question. “There’s movement under the bridge in front. The guy you’re looking for should be there.”

In the depths of Mirror Valley, there was a low-lying land full of silt. It could be a river before. Even though the river had run dry, a bridge with a sculpture of a beast head was preserved.

There were several piers and openings under the bridge. Cheng Qian spotted a few shriveled ugly monsters. They had pointy chins, beards on both cheeks and a long tail – apparently, they were a gang of mice spirits.

Their attention was drawn from the tablet evading the subject. A mouse spirit was sneaking around on lookout, and the rest was buzzing around in the bridge opening. The thing they were surrounding was their junior brother Han Yuan!

Han Yuan looked like a muddy monkey and was thrashing violently. Two big mice pinned him on the ground and another was daubing mud on his body. Beside them, a bonfire had been ignited – they were going to make Han Yuan into a “beggar’s human2”!

The course of nature goes round! The little beggar had stolen and eaten so many poultry, and now he was going to be toasted in mud. That was his karma!

As the tablet didn’t hide the three martial brothers’ figures this time, Han Yuan and those mice spirits all spotted them.

Han Yuan almost burst into excited tears, he howled desperately with relief, “Help! Senior Brothers – Help! – Let go of me! You fucking mice! I’m warning you: my senior brothers can blow clouds and puff fogs, control thunders and lightnings... just wait to be scorched by the lightning, you vile mice!”

His senior brothers that were said to be able to control thunders and lightnings were speechless.

Seeing the mud on Han Yuan's body, Yan Zhengming showed a revolted expression as if he had a toothache. "I think we may as well have him roasted."

No sooner had he finished speaking than the mouse on lookout pounced at him. Having encountered the battle between a snake and a bear, and the rebellion of thousands of monsters, he could hardly be terrified by such a wretched mouse which wasn't as tall as him. Yan Zhengming thrust the tablet into Li Yun's bosom and whipped up with his sword.

The mouse spirit jumped to scratch and Yan Zhengming swung his sword horizontally to resist. The mouse's nails raked the big gem on the sword, but the gem remained intact and its nails broke!

That mouse let out a blood-curdling scream. Then it ragingly opened its mouth and snapped at Yan Zhengming's sword. With a sweep of his arm, Yan Zhengming elbowed the mouse at its nose. It gave a choked cry and toppled sideways to the front of Cheng Qian, who had been waiting there beforehand.

By now, Cheng Qian was only relatively practiced in the opening move, so he was already in position, staring at the situation concentratedly. The big mouse was seeing stars by Yan Zhengming's knock and stumbled under Cheng Qian's sword at such an angle that it looked like it delivered itself there.

Cheng Qian instinctively gripped the fang with both hands and there went his opening move –

The heroic mouse was sent to Nirvana.(The mouse was killed.)

Not expecting that he would kill it with one shot, Cheng Qian went blank for a moment. On the other hand, seeing that this matter couldn't easily

reach an end, the other three mice had abandoned Han Yuan and rushed at them separately.

They were going to launch a death fight upon those that spoiled their dinner.

1. Jin: a unit of weight equivalent to 0.5 kg
2. “Beggar’s human”: derived from the Chinese dish Beggar’s Chicken which is whole chicken roasted while caked in mud

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Acting with one accord, the three mice avoided Cheng Qian who was covered in blood. Then two of them charged towards Yan Zhengming, and the other ran to the front of Li Yun.

Li Yun was just like a passerby. He searched all over his body only to find that he had spent the whole day being upset and even forgot to bring any weapon with him... although it wouldn't necessarily be helpful even if he had brought one.

In a flurry, Li Yun plucked the colorful feather off his collar and used it as a weapon against the mouse spirit.

Since Zipeng Zhenren was an almighty being among monsters, even her feather had an out of the ordinary deterrent force. The mouse obviously cringed upon seeing it, moving around Li Yun with its shifty eyes goggled, weighing up whether he was bluffing or a real threat.

Li Yun was scared by the mouse's movement and, unfortunately, got a cramp in his thigh. But he knew there was no room to display the slightest amount of timidity, so he had to put up with it, which happened to make him appear more threatening.

Thankfully, Cheng Qian soon came to his aid with his fang.

It didn't take much effort for Cheng Qian to recover from killing. He thought that it would be a shocking and paralyzing feeling, yet it turned out that he didn't feel like that at all.

When he held the bloody sharp tooth, Cheng Qian was extremely calm, as if he had only cut a cabbage just now. His impassive face made him look like a life-claiming ghost.

Cheng Qian quickly noticed that this mouse spirit dreaded him, not the other way around. As he advanced, the mouse backed, even if its teeth were bared to intimidate him.

While the enemy's confidence decreased, Cheng Qian's increased. He even got bolder instead of recoiling. Realising its intimidation didn't work, the mouse confirmed that its opponent was not a guy to mess with and turned tail hurriedly.

Every being in the universe had intelligence and it was no easy task to cultivate. It had finally evolved into a spirit after much trouble, wouldn't it cherish its life?

Seeing that their fellow fled, the other two mice followed suit for precaution, even though they didn't figure out what happened.

This small handful of mice spirits scurried away helter-skelter.

Li Yun sank down on the ground. He finally earned himself a break to have the leg cramps go.

Nevertheless, just as they started to breathe after defeating the first wave of enemies, a strange sound came from behind into Yan Zhengming's ears. Cheng Qian seemed to notice something and cried from a distance, "DANGER!"

With a flash, Yan Zhengming flung himself forward and exerted the first move of the second form, "Cycle".[1](#)

He swung his sword fiercely, which hit some sharp weapon with a clash. And therewith sounded a gritty howl.

Yan Zhengming retreated awkwardly pinching the hilt of his sword. He spun to see a huge lynx nimbly landing several steps away from him and

turning into a semi-humanoid form – that monster was hefty and had almost changed to a human shape, except the claws. It grinned weirdly, scarlet tongue licking its lips.

No wonder the mice spirits ran away so fast. While the mice hunted, the lynx was lurking behind!

Young master Yan was just a nice plump mouthful of soft flesh in the lynx's eyes. It scraped its toe tips against the ground, and in the next moment lunged for Yan Zhengming at a lightning speed. Its trenchant claws were nearly invulnerable. Not even fur was hurt when it clashed with the sword.

The lynx pressed its claw and the sword was pushed down by the brute force.

Yan Zhengming tripped on something and teetered down, which was to the lynx's great delight. It immediately changed back to its beast form and pressed its claw on him with its mouth wide open.

Li Yun and Cheng Qian were standing far away, and the fight between Yan Zhengming and the lynx happened so suddenly that it was impossible to go aid him in time.

Li Yun reached into his bosom and before he clearly saw what he fished out, he pitched it at the lynx spirit recklessly.

Cheng Qian caught sight of his move from the corner of his eyes and shouted, "Second Senior Brother, don't..."

But it was too late. The porcelain bottle had hit the lynx's head accurately. The whole bottle of water came spilling over its body and turned the lynx with shiny fur into a large lumpy toad.

For a second, even the lynx itself was dumbfounded.

The lynx was astonished and incensed. It wanted to roar, only to let out a lazy croak. The lynx couldn't help sticking out its slender tongue, which made it freak out and forget how to stick it back.

The tongue hung in front of the toad's chest and skimmed young master Yan's soft neck. Despite having just narrowly escaped death, young master Yan went mad there and then and let out an inhuman bellow, "Li Yun, you piss me off!"

Forthwith, he kicked the huge toad over as though he suddenly gained infinite strength, and riddled the lynx spirit frantically like a raging shrewish woman.

Apparently, the lynx in a toad's shape no longer had steely claws. Before it learned to jump with toad's legs, it was stabbed through by Yan Zhengming's embittered sword. After thrashing about hysterically, the lynx got back to its original appearance and died. It lay there still, eyes wide open.

But the perpetrator, young master Yan himself looked like he wished to be dead instead. Yan Zhengming couldn't stop thinking about that lick and several times, he put the sword around his neck with the intention of committing suicide.

Cheng Qian and Li Yun helped "Beggar's Han Yuan" up and shattered the dried mud off his body, exposing his mud-mottled nude with an awful stench. Cheng Qian looked him up and down and turned to embarrassedly report his find to first senior brother.

"First Senior Brother, aren't you curious about whether little junior brother hasn't changed clothes or bathed since the day he played with the toad?" Said Cheng Qian. "I know it now. He didn't bathe."

Yan Zhengming: "..."

He put away his sword, face void of emotion, thinking that Han Yuan was the one supposed to kill himself.

Han Yuan sobbed with tears of joy, “Senior Brothers... Xiao-Qian...”

He attempted to give them a reunion hug, sadly none of his senior brothers would like to get close to a beggar covered with smelly mud in his birthday suit, and all dispersed.

As Yan Zhengming tried hard to forget about his sullied neck, he spluttered and pointed at Han Yuan, “If you don’t want to return to be expelled, copy those scriptures for a lifetime!”

Han Yuan dared not answer back and only kept his eyes roving, seeking to find an ally. At last, his look for help rested on Cheng Qian.

However, Cheng Qian didn’t answer his look. He wiped the blood off his face with his only sleeve left. Feeling thirsty and hungry, he was too tired to put an act, so he said out of his natural character, “Junior Brother, before cultivating, you’d better enhance your brain.”

Han Yuan stared at his “temperate, kind, courteous, restrained, and magnanimous” little senior brother in astonishment. In one day, he suffered both a physical and mental major injury. Ultimately it was Li Yun who helped him out. Shaking the tablet, he suggested, “Senior Brother, I think we should go to the Celestial Platform first.”

Yan Zhengming humphed and took the initiative to move. After some consideration, Li Yun took his outer robe off and gave it to Han Yuan, lest disciples of Fuyao sect earned themselves a reputation as exhibitionists in the Demon Valley.

The Celestial Platform wasn’t very far from the Mirror Valley. Soon enough, a strong bloody smell drifted over along the wind. A pall of black

fog billowed from the tablet in Li Yun's hand, outlining an amorphous humanoid figure which was a real blast from the past for Cheng Qian.

He had dreamed of this person!

Han Yuan was scared out of his wits and screeched, "Oh, fuck! What is this?"

No reply was given. The mysterious shadow levitated upright in midair with a solemn atmosphere. Despite his hazy face, Cheng Qian felt awe-inspiring calmness in him as if he was prepared to sacrifice himself.

He couldn't help but ask, "Senior, you... are you Lord Beiming?"

"Beiming?" He chuckled and said softly, "Who deserves the title of Beiming? That's merely an arrogant title given by some short-sighted people."

Cheng Qian turned his words over in mind and reached their implied meaning – that was an acknowledgement.

But wasn't "Lord Beiming" a legendary archdevil? How come he housed in a tablet?

Did he house in the tablet or actually embed himself in master's charm?

Could it be that master's charm summons neither water nor lightning, but summons the archdevil?

Was there... such a charm in the world?

Cheng Qian felt utterly clueless about what was happening. He only now realized that his knowledge of the cultivation world was so little, that he couldn't even give a simple guess at what were all those incredible things.

Thanks to Lord Beiming's escort, monsters either couldn't see them or fled at their mere sight – it's possible to assume that the thrilling scene where they battled the mice and lynx spirits, was probably regarded by this almighty being as “a scuffle between kids and mice”, so he didn't intend to help.

Maybe that mouse spirit which made Li Yun's leg cramp with terror was, in this senior's eyes, no different from a real mouse.

The Celestial Platform was a sacrificial altar located on the bottom of Demon Valley, rising up incongruously.

The platform was bare and empty, as monsters cannot come close, while its surroundings had become hell.

As they had witnessed this scene in the Mirror Valley and hence were mentally prepared, only Han Yuan was flabbergasted.

It was not until then, that Han Yuan realised what place he had intruded into, and what risk his senior brothers took to rescue him. The reason why he was still alive and kicking was simply that those monsters were tied up in fighting against each other and had no time to care about him.

Abruptly, the tablet fissured in Li Yun's hand. After some light glittered along the strokes of charms, it returned to stillness. Then Lord Beiming suddenly detached himself from the shackles of the tablet, and the black mist veiling him cleared up, revealing a lanky man dressed in a jet black robe fluttering in the wind like the feathers of a raven. His pale hands were hanging out, and an archaic ring could be dimly seen on his finger.

Only his face was still hidden behind the black mist, merely exposing Lord Beiming's jaw, which was as pale as his hands.

Cheng Qian somehow felt an indefinable sense of kinship, but before he could have a better view of him, a burning light glared across his body, and in the next moment, he turned into a cloud of black mist and whooshed toward the platform getting out of sight, leaving a gentle “go back as soon as possible”.

Cheng Qian suddenly developed a strange feeling – he was not coming back.

“I know it!” Exclaimed Li Yun, the master of all erratic tricks, “I know it! The golden light on his body is an invisible charm!”

Yan Zhengming looked spellbound by the scene. He murmured, “Running water, curling smoke and fleeting cloud can all make invisible charms. But... can it also be carved on a human’s body?”

“That’s definitely not a human.” Said Li Yun decisively. “It’s a soul. I’ve read from an anecdote, that there was once a demonic almighty being who was a grandmaster at charms. He was able to carve invisible charms on people’s three spiritual souls and seven corporeal souls². He had left invisible charms on many people’s souls so that life after life, they would never get rid of his control. I bet Lord Beiming has such means too...”

“Li Yun!” Yan Zhengming was finally revived. Noticing Han Yuan and Cheng Qian were breathlessly listening to his talk about demonic cultivators, he immediately cried him down. “Shut up! – Let’s go.”

The whole Celestial Platform was shrouded in a black fog that insulated the spot of massacre from its surroundings. Standing on the hilltop beside it, they were totally oblivious to the bloody smell and battle cry from inside.

Out of the blue, a cluster of flames illuminated a corner of the fog-veiled Celestial Platform, whereupon it spread sideways at an incredible speed.

Yan Zhengming felt a twinge in his heart and shouted out, “Close your eyes!”

Everyone followed his order subconsciously. But the strong light seemed to bake their eyes through the eyelids and it looked like the entire world was dragged into a sea of fire.

For ages, the blazing light didn’t die down. Only the black fog surrounding the Celestial Platform seemed indestructible, not evanescent a bit.

Cheng Qian was the first to tentatively open his eyes. He was still dazzled and could barely see a thing only after a couple of blinks.

He saw an egg in front of them... slowly rolling towards them.

1. Cycle: it basically means to go around and begin again, just like the cycle of seasons. I have a bad naming sense, so I can’t think of a better to put it. Do you readers have any suggestion?
2. Three spiritual souls and seven corporeal souls: see [here](#).

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It had been a whole day and night since Han Yuan had gotten to eat or drink anything. One could imagine how hungry he was right now. Upon seeing that the egg that was nearly two Chi¹ high, he couldn't help but swallow and ask eagerly, "W-what is this?"

"No idea." Yan Zhengming took half a step back as he darted a warning glance at Han Yuan. "Don't touch it! Things in the Demon Valley cannot be touched rashly. Wipe off your saliva. Come on, let's go. Master must be anxious."

Indeed, it was getting dark and perils lurked everywhere in the Demon Valley. Without Lord Beiming escorting them on the way back, the road would only become more dangerous.

Nobody dared to delay, and everyone set off along the way they came. Even the noisiest Han Yuan became mute.

Men of the world valued brotherhood loyalty the most. He'd forever remember the debt he owed his senior brothers.

Seeing they were leaving, the egg didn't give up. It evaded all those obstacles on the way and chased after them insistently.

Li Yun looked back and shouted, surprise and suspicion in his voice, "Just which monster's egg is this? Why is it running after us?"

Cheng Qian, who carried the bear spirit's fang, coldly said, "Maybe it wants to be a boiled egg."

The egg seemed to understand human language, or perhaps it merely felt the malice from Cheng Qian's words, as it trembled and hung back for a

moment. At last, it slowly turned around, gingerly avoided Cheng Qian, rolled to Yan Zhengming's feet, and stopped there pathetically.

Yan Zhengming briefly paused and then bypassed it heartlessly. But after a few steps, he couldn't help looking back. Somehow, he saw an aura of deep disappointment and pitifulness emitting from its bare eggshell.

Therefore, young master Yan ended up stopping once more. After a few moments of indecision, he pointed at Han Yuan and said, "You... Hmm, go pick it up."

"Ah? Didn't you tell me not to touch it?" Han Yuan raised his eyebrows and stared in surprise.

Li Yun also didn't understand, asking, "First Senior Brother, why?"

How should he answer the question?

Yan Zhengming frowned. He couldn't really say he found that egg pitiable, could he?

Then he had a brainwave and came up with an excuse. He loftily said, "Didn't Zipeng Zhenren ask us to take the thing on the Celestial Platform back to her? It's said that demonic cultivators cannot enter that place, so I assume she herself doesn't know what lies there. We can use this to fool her."

Having traveled all this way, Li Yun and Cheng Qian were both physically and mentally exhausted, and had forgotten about the deal with Zipeng Zhenren. They both agreed to follow this advice after being reminded.

But at the same time, they felt that their devil-may-care first senior brother was abnormally meticulous this time.

Strangely enough, their journey on the way back had seemed safer than when they'd gone in even without Lord Beiming's escort. They'd kept their guard up the entire time, yet only met several small lower level monsters rushing by. After many false alarms, they made it back to Zipeng Zhenren's abode safely.

The giant bird was still lying prone there, though the image hanging over its head had disappeared. They were at a temporary loss about whether she was asleep or dead.

Yan Zhengming turned around to signal his junior brothers to be quiet and walked forward cautiously to reconnoiter—selfishly, he hoped Zipeng Zhenren was dead so that she wouldn't give them trouble... but he knew that was almost impossible.

All of a sudden, he heard a crack from behind. All of them flinched at the sound. Their eyes roved around and fell on Han Yuan...and the egg in his arms. They saw cracks emerging on the eggshell from the top downwards.

Finally, at the center of the cracks, a piece of eggshell came off. Han Yuan goggled. The thing sticking out of the egg wasn't a beak, but a hand.

A baby's hand.

Han Yuan hurriedly placed the egg on the ground, and all four boys gaped at the sight of a baby crawling out of an egg.

It was like a chubby meatball and looked not at all different from a normal human baby at first glance, except that it already had the appearance of a one-year-old mortal infant with two unobtrusive birthmarks on its back.

Han Yuan reached with his muddy hand and poked the egg-born baby. Then he moved his gaze to the part which he shouldn't be looking at, and made an ill-timed judgment. "It – it's a girl."

The little baby fell flat on her face from Han Yuan's poke. She tried to move her limbs, only to find she wasn't as mobile as she had been in the egg. Feeling a little upset, she let out a loud bawl.

And made the entire place wobble.

Han Yuan, who was the closest to her, plunked down on the ground and screamed, "What the heck is it?"

"Heavenly Monster," a weak voice answered him.

Zipeng Zhenren had woken up when they weren't paying attention. She hung over the giant bird's head, as vague as a haze, her outline just faintly visible in her ghostly state.

It seemed that she had no extra strength to mind others, and only contemplated the little girl on the ground with mixed emotions. At length, she sighed and said softly, "It is the result of the union between the Monster Queen and a mortal, and should have been executed right after its birth. Soaking herself in human blood, the Queen hacked her way into the Celestial Platform despite the pain of being sliced into pieces and struck by lightning. She died after placing the child there. As it is born with half-human blood, the Celestial Platform's restriction didn't apply to it. For a hundred years this egg has not moved, and everyone thought it was stillborn. No one could have dreamed that one day, the calamity of the monster species would descend upon her..."

Han Yuan had been befuddled by her narration, but he accurately seized on the point of it all and exclaimed, "What? The Monster King had been cheated on?"

"You... shut up...!" Yan Zhengming hissed faintly.

Cheng Qian had listened and understood—they had taken out the “THING” from Celestial Platform by accident.

That explained why the Monster King couldn’t get rid of this child even when he had descended and lost his powers—because demonic cultivators were unable to ascend the Celestial Platform.

But...who had taken her out of the Celestial Platform?

Lord Beiming?

“Bring her over; let me have a look,” Zipeng ordered.

Yan Zhengming was immediately alarmed. “What do you want to do with her?”

But after that, he seemed to realize his tone was too blunt and hurried to add even more bluntly, “Senior, this little hen was just born.”

When the wimpish baby cried, Yan Zhengming just hurried away in distaste. But disliking her was one thing, to give her to Zipeng was another—as she described it, this infant was a living green hat² on the Monster King’s head. Zipeng Zhenren was the Monster King’s servant, so who knew what she would do to this kid?

Whatever background the little thing had, she only pipped moments ago and hadn’t yet done anything good or bad.

So how could others decide her life and death freely when there was nothing to judge?

Zipeng Zhenren didn’t expect that she would be disobeyed; her sickly image became more and more distinct as she turned to Yan Zhengming furiously. “How dare—”

But she was interrupted by the baby girl who had been frightened by the outburst. The baby choked up for a second, and after taking a deep breath she shrieked at the top of her lungs, “Waaah—”

Her bawling was extraordinarily potent. A quake stronger than the one before struck the cave again. Rocks came falling down from above. It looked like Zipeng Zhenren’s abode was about to collapse from the baby’s crying!

Yan Zhengming: “Get moving!”

“What about her?” Han Yuan looked in bewilderment at the wailing baby girl.

Li Yun jumped to dodge a falling stone which just narrowly missed his foot, and said in a panic, “Carry, carry her! She doesn’t even have teeth; you won’t be bitten!”

Han Yuan snatched her up, holding the baby in a strange way. Probably because it was less comfortable to be in his hands than to lie on the ground, the baby’s howl grew even sharper.

In the chaos of flying sand and falling rocks, Han Yuan tripped on the lower hem of his robe; the robe belonged to Li Yun, who was older and taller than him, so the lower hem had been dragging on the ground.

Fortunately, Cheng Qian was sharp-eyed and had quick hands. He grabbed the baby’s leg before she was crushed by Han Yuan, and lifted her upside down like a radish.

The Heavenly Monster was indeed a born jinx. The poor baby almost got herself killed as soon as she was born.

Zipeng Zhenren’s raging voice boomed, “No one’s leaving!”

While speaking, her image dispersed and the giant bird that was originally paralyzed on the ground stood up. It lifted up a foot to stomp them.

Cheng Qian instinctively wanted to resist with the help of his fang. But it was so heavy that there was no way he could use such an unwieldy weapon with one hand while carrying a little girl with the other.

Cheng Qian started to regret abandoning his wooden sword. He didn't even have enough time to adjust this awkward one-handed hold on the baby's leg before he was forced to fall back.

The giant bird's foot was so enormous that it completely filled up Cheng Qian's sight. There wasn't any way that he could dodge it, and Li Yun had already run out of his magic water.

Cheng Qian thought he could even feel the talon landing on his head. His scalp constricted, and he felt that his life had already ended.

Nonetheless, the expected agony didn't come. Cheng Qian looked up, only to see Zipeng Zhenren's giant talon being held up by a wooden sword.

The wooden sword was less than two Cun wide, exactly what they normally used for practice. The hand holding it was very bony, and all around the wrist were protruding veins.

“Master!”

Cheng Qian had never felt Muchun Zhenren's pinched figure so stalwart.

Muchun looked at him and smiled. His eyes roved over his disheveled but still alive-and-kicking apprentices, and he muttered in his familiar voice, “You... go first. I'll be back soon.”

With that, he turned his wrist and deftly pushed Zipeng Zhenren's claw to the other side, causing it to hit the wall with a loud rumbling sound, shaking the cave more violently.

Cheng Qian hesitated. He was unwilling to go, but Li Yun pushed him and said, "Don't you believe that master will defeat that old hen? Come on, let's go."

This time, even first senior brother didn't contradict him. Four and a half people ran out of Zipeng Zhenren's abode, heading back along the steps to leave the way they came. By the time they exited the pond, night had already fallen and the moon had climbed up to the sky.

Cheng Qian loosened the hand he'd used to cover the baby's mouth and nose while in the water. He laid her aside and breathed a sigh of relief, ending the mutual torture for both him and the whining Heavenly Monster.

None of the four mentioned going back. At this moment, the clean freak forgot about his dirty clothes, and the hungry kid forgot about his hunger. They sat in a huddle by the pond, waiting for Muchun Zhenren's return.

1. two Chi: 66.6 cm, or 5 inches
2. green hat: someone wearing a green hat refers to a cuckold in Chinese.

Volume I Chapter 18

As the evening progressed, the mood at the shore became increasingly bleak. Cheng Qian pulled his clothes tighter. He glanced at Han Yuan, who shivered with cold because of only wearing an outer robe, and felt that the other boy deserved it.

The moment that thought came to Cheng Qian, Yan Zhengming had already shared the same sentiment out loud.

Yan Zhengming folded his arms in front of his chest, staring at Han Yuan with a severe expression. He had already thrown his sumptuous sword away and planned to kick it into the pond as soon as their master returned safely—that was a sword which had not only poked a toad, but had also killed mice.

Yan Zhengming said coldly, “It hasn’t even been a month since your initiation, yet you dared to go to the valley. Seems you’re going to crumble the Fuyao Mountain to dust in the future? You might as well be roasted and eaten by those mice!”

Hearing this reproach, Han Yuan, who had been beaten black and blue, slightly changed his countenance and was about to scowl. However, upon properly reflecting, his embitterment instantly died out as he remembered that his senior brothers had taken such risk to save him. He hung his head listlessly, preparing for the coming rebuke.

Unexpectedly, Li Yun cut in when first senior brother was just about to reprimand Han Yuan from head to toe. He said softly, “First Senior Brother, it’s my fault. I’m the one who made little junior brother intrude into the back mountain. I didn’t know it was connected to the Demon Valley.”

His words stunned everyone.

Although Han Yuan was kind of a stupid person who was always wheeling and dealing, he wasn't actually senseless. He did hate Li Yun upon getting captured and nearly eaten by the mice spirits, but this hatred died away when he saw Li Yun come to his rescue bare-handed.

Now that Li Yun candidly acknowledged his mistake, the last bit of grudge in Han Yuan's heart passed away like a breath of wind.

The little beggar bent his head shyly. "Not at all. No one forced me to go there. Besides, senior brothers saved me."

"No... In fact, I didn't." Li Yun seemed to have gotten set off; those words that had once been difficult for him to bring up now poured out like water rushing out of a floodgate. "I was terribly scared when I discovered what laid in the valley, and if it weren't for first senior brother and third junior brother I would have already attempted to retreat..."

Hearing that, Cheng Qian somehow found Li Yun sort of cute. Though they were all disorderly and exhausted, never before had they felt so calm, nor shared such a harmonious atmosphere. Cheng Qian smiled. "Who wouldn't have? I also felt freaked out."

"I didn't see you freaked out at all," Yan Zhengming humphed. "Especially when you climbed up the bear's body and touched it eighteen times¹."

Cheng Qian was perplexed; he didn't quite catch that last sentence, so he explained muddle-headedly, "I didn't touch it that many times.² I just wanted its fang for self-defense. Second Senior Brother was more courageous; he didn't even have any weapons with him."

Hearing junior brother respond to the wrong point, Yan Zhengming suddenly realized that he seemingly had said something improper—he gave away his vulgar recreation. A layer of light red rose in his cheeks immediately.

Li Yun froze momentarily, then quickly dropped his head as though concealing something. Obviously, he wasn't any more refined.

Han Yuan was much franker compared to his "sanctimonious" senior brothers. He was already splitting his sides with laughter, making the little Heavenly Monster murmur in her sleep.

Only "innocent" little Cheng Qian displayed a baffled face.

Yan Zhengming was shamed into anger. He picked up a stone to throw at Han Yuan. Han Yuan covered his head and dodged, then distracted Yan Zhengming by pointing at the Heavenly Monster. "I have something serious to say! Senior Brother, mercy! Here's a female monster, are we going to adopt her?"

"It depends on master. In any case, monsters in the Demon Valley won't accept her," Li Yun said.

Everyone went silent at his words.

No one wanted her.

This sentence prickled Cheng Qian's heart. He glanced at the Heavenly Monster, who had fallen fast asleep again after a few murmurs, and involuntarily felt compassionate because of their shared suffering.

Yan Zhengming said, "It's most likely that she'll stay with us. Master loves to carry things back with him. However, I think we'd better come up with a name for her before master returns. Otherwise..."

He pointedly looked sidelong at Han Yuan, whose eyelids twitched at the thought of his unlucky name.

Yan Zhengming sneered, “If master names her Han Shouzhi(sucking fingers), I’m afraid she’d want to die when she grows up.”

They started discussing all of the most elegant and common names for a girl.

Eventually, Yan Zhengming made the final decision. “Since we took her out of the pond, I think ‘Tan(pond)’ is good. And combined with master’s surname, the full name will be Han Tan.”

Han Yuan added: “Not bad, and we’ve got a pet name for her, ‘Puddle’.”

Yan Zhengming: “...”

He didn’t even bother beating Han Yuan this time because it would only detract from his own elegance.

A long time passed, and because he’d been so sleepy and tired, Cheng Qian had unconsciously dozed off on top of a rock while listening to the sound of his martial brothers’ relaxed chatting. When the dew began to form and dawn was to break, he was nudged awake.

Cheng Qian gave a start. Rubbing his eyes, he saw Muchun Zhenren staring at them, his face shadowed with melancholy. The decency he had shown while fighting Zipeng was nowhere to be seen now.

Muchun was confused. How did his disciples enter the valley as four people, and after passing a day, come out as five?

After running his eyes over his early-riser first apprentice, his yawning second apprentice, his blankly-staring third apprentice, and finally the fourth apprentice who looked down to avoid eye contact, he sighed, “Do you know why I look like Zipeng Zhenren’s father when I am actually three hundred years younger than her?”

Before they replied Muchun continued, looking straight at Han Yuan.
“Because she didn’t have any apprentice.”

Han Yuan’s chin almost dropped to the ground.

“Master, what did you say to that old hen?” Yan Zhengming interrupted as if he hadn’t sensed the hint of criticism in master’s words. “Did she scratch you?”

Muchun Zhenren rolled his eyes heavenward. “I naturally talked sense into her—Zhengming, cultivators should be cautious, pay attention to their words and deeds, and try to win people over through virtue. Why are you always verbally abusing your seniors?”

“She almost scratched me! Someday I’m going to pull out all of her feathers and make a duster out of them to clean the Mission Hall!”

Muchun: “...”

Finishing that, Yan Zhengming felt much more comfortable, and just then thought of the business.

“By the way, Master,” he said to Muchun very casually, “We’ve picked up an apprentice for you!”

Muchun Zhenren looked at the chubby Heavenly Monster, and then looked into the boundless sky, helplessly sighing, “My little apprentices, let your master live a few years longer!”

Their master helplessly accepted the new apprentice, and Han Tan became their little junior sister.

In countless folk tales, the “little junior sister” of a sect was someone who would inspire fancy in people’s minds. They were peerless beauties with

snow-white skin, or little dolls who smiled like blooming flowers... But presumably, no one would like to hear the tales of those fairies at their diaper-stage.

At the start, Muchun Zhenren intended to arrange Yan Zhengming's maids to look after her by turns. But things didn't turn out as he hoped. The Heavenly Monster cried so hard that three rooms crashed down in less than one day and a half.

Her cry could even make Zipeng Zhenren's abode collapse, let alone such houses built with bricks and tiles.

Muchun Zhenren had no choice but to transfer little Puddle to a cave at the mountainside, which was said to be an ancestor's retreat and could withstand the thunders from the highest of the heavens.

But in this way, Yan Zhengming's pretty maids were dissatisfied.

The most work they had ever done in the Land of the Tender was just combing, burning incense, and pruning. How could they withstand the torment of such a little imp? Besides, the old senior must have been an ascetic, as there was nothing but stones in the cave. The bed was a large hard rock, and the chair was a small hard rock... Was this really a place for humans to stay?

These tearful maids ran back to the sect leader and announced that they would rather die than go there.

In a fit of rage, Muchun Zhenren ordered his apprentices to take turns to babysit their powerful junior sister —after all, who were the ones that had caused this blunder and brought her back?

The apprentices took the punishment, taking turns to bring disaster to... no, take care of little Puddle.

Han Yuan who was, needless to say, a reckless beggar, had wrapped her in diapers and changed this gifted junior sister into a dusty quasi-beggar within just one day.

And because this gluttonous fourth senior brother had eaten most of her porridge, when the master had gone over to see her in the evening, he had been shocked by the scene of the hungry girl almost about to chomp down on a big fat worm.

Even Cheng Qian, who seemed to be more reliable, had turned out to be the very opposite. When it came to his turn, he just took his homework with him to the cave, and after finishing it, found some notes left behind by the predecessor. Although he couldn't understand most of them, he still studied them all night. When Cheng Qian was absorbed in something, even tribulation thunder couldn't distract him. So, he had completely forgotten about the existence of his little junior sister. By the time he realized it, his little junior sister had fallen asleep with dried porridge and tear stains covering her face.

The worst was Yan Zhengming. He came to the cave with a dozen Taoist children as if he was about to take vengeance, and ordered them around while not taking a single half-step into the cave himself. Every time the hapless baby finished defecating or urinating, her first senior brother would show a look of great loathing and keep a distance of at least eight Zhang away from her, ordering the Taoist children to keep washing her several times and to perfume her so heavily that a passing-by bee had fainted from the excessive scent.

The most outrageous was Li Yun. Li Yun thought his little junior sister was pitiful because she couldn't walk steadily with her short legs, so he dribbled a few droplets of the Toad Liquid on her body, tied a rope around her neck, and then took his toad junior sister on a walk around the mountain...

After all of this, Muchun Zhenren dared not to hand Puddle over to any of his apprentices. She also is a life, after all.

That was how he ended up getting someone to weave him a basket for carrying the Heavenly Monster on his back, and tormenting her every day with those strange scriptures.

1. eighteen touches: a traditional Chinese folk song, which is flirtatious, bawdy and erotic in nature, considered vulgar and tasteless it has been banned numerous times. See more [here](#).
2. in Chinese, a number doesn't necessarily mean the number it represents, it can also mean "many". This always happens to multiples of 3, like 3, 6, 9; but it can also lead to misunderstanding. So when Yan Zhengming said "eighteen" to mean that Cheng Qian searched around the bear's body, Cheng Qian just took it literally. That's how this conversation happened.

Volume I Chapter 19

Usually, those who grew up together would naturally get close to each other and become good friends. However, this didn't apply to those whelps on the Fuyao Mountain. One was overly coddled, one was always up to mischief, one was extremely detached, and one was unusually slovenly in dressing style and manner... But after the trip to the Demon Valley, the estrangement between the four martial brothers unknowingly melted away, and thus they began to reveal their true nature.

Muchun Zhenren felt very grateful about this at first. But soon he realized, that it would have been better if they had remained the same as they were before.

A mischievous child is only a child; two together makes 1000 ducks; and three combined, seas are overturned; as for four...

Peace has escaped from Fuyao Mountain—

One day, the more and more presumptuous young master Yan hit upon a strange idea that he wanted to put a censer under every junior brother's desk. Thus, the Mission Hall kept emitting smoke that whole day like a large stockpot, while the culprit just slept comfortably in the vast expanse of whiteness like a joyful dumpling floating on the soup.

Li Yun couldn't abide the sight of his cosy sleep. After a flash of inspiration, he took out the formula of "Sweet-Dream Incense".

"Sweet-Dream Incense" was, without doubt, not as good natured as its name. It was said that it could bring people erotic dreams when burnt during their sleep.

Knowing that, Han Yuan volunteered to prepare it.

As everyone knows, Han Yuan always did things topsy-turvy, so what would you expect from a person who couldn't even read characters?

What's worse, the little beggar was also passionate about innovation. He daringly added his own ideas to the formula—he mixed two extra spices to it, which accidentally made the “Sweet-Dream Incense” psychedelic. Then he stuffed it into his own censer expectantly when first senior brother was having a morning nap.

That day, all the creatures around the Mission Hall went crazy.

Two butterflies floundered over master's head, quivering their wings and making it seem as if master was wearing a hairpin of the gaudiest kind.

And Li Yun's new favorite pet—a bellied katydid, crawled drunkenly out of its cage. At some strange pace, it plunged into Cheng Qian's ink slab. Cheng Qian's hand which had been lifting a writing brush, ready to dip it in ink, froze in the air. The flecks of ink on his sleeve were like a cluster of black plum blossoms.

Master had never been so attractive to butterflies that he couldn't even continue reading the sculptures. He pushed Puddle, who climbed onto his head to catch butterflies, back to her basket on his back. Discomfited and exasperated, he rebuked Han Yuan in his drawling voice like a laodan¹ singing an opera, and commanded him to put the censor out.

Han Yuan grinned cheekily. He took out the censer from under the table and was about to splash it with a bowl of tea. As Li Yun snickered at his master's new look, Cheng Qian picked out the katydid using two brushes and tossed it into the censer, tittering, “Junior Brother, let me do you a favor.”

Li Yun: “Oh no!”

But it was too late. The katydid and Han Yuan's tea had showered on the censer. Those censers that young master Yan brought here all had waterproof charms on them. If you did want to put it out, you'd have to pour the water through some special holes and canals. Being provoked, the waterproof charm fought back right away. A flame leapt up and sputtered, but surprisingly Li Yun's katydid wasn't burnt dead. It scooted out of the fire in a cloak of flames and scurried into master's moustache, leaving a sharp streak of sparks across the air.

That was where the spices in the incense came in—the katydid burnt master's mustache into a strand of flavorsome charred hair.

On that very same day, both Han Yuan and Lin Yun were punished by writing the scriptures twenty times; Yan Zhengming also didn't escape the punishment. He was made to write it out ten times because he was the initiator and it was too unreasonable of him to sleep overtly in the morning class. Although Cheng Qian played a part too, considering that he had no intention of that and had admitted his fault timely, he was the only one that was spared.

Because of this, Yan Zhengming unashamedly halted Cheng Qian on his way back to Qing'an Dwelling in the evening. Putting on the air of first senior brother, he said, "Little Copper Coin², I happen to have free time today, do you want me to give some guidance on your swordsmanship?"

Through the past period of getting along with him, Cheng Qian had already got him sussed out—when it came to eating or playing, young master Yan was bound to march first. But once asked to sit down to study, he'd immediately become a "sick beauty", grumbling that he was aching from toenails to hair.

Just now when Yan Zhengming was practicing swordplay, he even claimed to have heatstroke.

He offered to give some guidance? Only when pigs fly.

Unsurprisingly, in the next moment, his first senior brother spoke out his true purpose unblushingly. “Alas, I suddenly remembered that master asked me to copy the scriptures. Hmm... it seems that I don’t have free time now, but if you could help me with that...”

As they saying goes, an owl in the house—he doesn’t come with nothing.³

So Cheng Qian declined him without any hesitation. “Senior Brother, you might as well just write the scriptures. I dare not trouble you to do such heavy manual labor as practicing swordplay. I’m afraid you may sprain your back.”

Yan Zhengming: “...”

Why couldn’t people forever remain the same as they used to be? His hypocritical yet courteous third junior brother would never return.

“Wait!” Yan Zhengming was loath to give up. He turned his head and scanned around. Seeing nobody else, he threw his arm around Cheng Qian’s neck and pulled him over, saying quietly, “Write me a few copies, and I’ll tell you a secret.”

Cheng Qian sighed and said in all earnestness, “First Senior Brother, if the secret is ‘how to tie your belt to make it flutter’, you needn’t tell me.”

Without a word, Yan Zhengming just took advantage of his height and abducted Cheng Qian by carrying him under his arms—he walked so quickly that it was as if wind blew under his feet, not one bit like someone who’d gotten sunstroke.

Cheng Qian seldom wandered around the mountain. His life was confined to a narrow trip between Qing’an Dwelling and Mission Hall.

Of course it wasn't because he had no curiosity, but that he had strong self-control. He thought that it would be unacceptable if he ran about before he truly learned something. Therefore, although he knew there were a lot of caves left by predecessors, he never visited any of them.

Yan Zhengming carried him to the top of a hill. In the whistling of the wind, he took him to a big stone which resembled a monkey. "Here we are."

Cheng Qian shot a glance at the stone and was surprised. "This... Is this a statue put up for little junior brother?"

"Little brat, just go on with your acid humor, you'll be begging me soon enough." Said Yan Zhengming, his tone triumphant.

Finishing that, he produced a handkerchief out of his bosom and wiped the dust off the stone, revealing a crack outlining the shape of a gate.

Yan Zhengming put his hand on that "gate", head down and eyes closed for a moment. After some creaks, he pushed open the gate on the stone monkey's stomach. It was a dark cramped cave inside, with a flight of steps heading downwards to the deep.

Yan Zhengming: "This gate can only be opened by people who can absorb qi into their body. Unless you go to beg master, no one else except me can take you in."

With that, he bent and went in.

Cheng Qian followed him languidly. He wasn't very interested, so he asked perfunctorily, "What's this place?"

"No name, but master calls it a Library." Answered Yan Zhengming as he led the way.

Cheng Qian was taken aback.

Charms were carved on both sides of the stone walls. It seemed that they could sense people coming in, as the walls that were originally dark gave off dim light as they entered. It wasn't dazzling, but enough for illumination.

"It has an expansive collection of ancient books and records passed down through thousands of years. Apart from scriptures of various schools which master prefers the most, there are many cultivation methods and swordplay collected by seniors." If Yan Zhengming had a tail, it must have been sticking up now. "Little Copper Coin, if you can help me when master asks me to copy scriptures or sect rules... I can open the gate for you every ten days, how about that?"

As he spoke, they were reaching the end of the steps. A burst of the smell of ink from old papers assaulted their nostrils. Cheng Qian couldn't help but ask doubtfully, "If so, then why did I never see senior brother come down here?"

"You can't bite off more than you can chew; and more haste, less speed. I'm focusing on the Fuyao Wooden Swordplay right now, I'll get easily distracted if I learn more than I should." Yan Zhengming answered sternly.

Just one set of introduction swordplay had been taking him seven or eight years to practice, he really had the cheek to say that—

The narrow blind alley led suddenly into an open space. A huge cave presented itself. A book shelf stood there majestically from the ground to the roof. Piles of glass tablets, bamboo slips, hides and paper were neatly arranged by categories, including cultivation methods, swordplay, and varieties of erratic tricks, as well as travel notes of famous mountains and great rivers and so forth.

And in the back of the cave, there were steps leading to even deeper.

“The Library has nine floors in total with numerous collections. Li Yun’s formulas were just stolen out of here by me when I came to do cleanings. Tsk, the ne’er-do-well—by the way, Copper Coin, have you decided to write scriptures for me or not?” Said Yan Zhengming, hands clasped behind him.

Cheng Qian felt he was a mouse falling into a rice jar—it fitted his wishes exactly.

He never felt Yan Zhengming was so pleasing to the eye. Right now, he would even answer yes if his first senior asked him to marry him, let alone to copy scriptures!

Thus from then on, Cheng Qian started a more secluded life. He not only worked hard on his own study but also snatched every minute of his free time to share the mounting punishment of first senior brother’s, and had to digest the books he’d read in the Library in the dead of the night.

As promised, every ten days Yan Zhengming would open the gate for him. Cheng Qian was so covetous that he wished he could hold the entire Library in his brain. Every time he’d devour several passages and then used the next ten days to digest them.

Such days were full and elapsed very quickly. With the change of seasons, a year passed in a flash.

During this year, the Heavenly Monster, Puddle, had showed her nonhuman side—she’d learned to crawl, walk and jump very prematurely. Even though she was only one-year-old, her height already reached that of a three-or-four-year-old mortal girl.

Cheng Qian continued to visit the Library with unfailing regularity. Meanwhile, his handwriting was improving too, getting more and more like the characters on the stone gate at the mountain waist, and he even learned to imitate Yan Zhengming's handwriting.

At first, Yan Zhengming thought that Cheng Qian would take several books on erratic tricks or anecdotes out on the sly, just as Li Yun did. But much to his surprise, he once caught a glimpse of him seriously reading swordplay and cultivation methods.

Yan Zhengming, the worthless first senior brother thus drew a conclusion—Copper Coin was crazy.

Cheng Qian was an absolute aberration on the Fuyao Mountain, especially in contrast with Han Yuan, who couldn't even recognize all the characters of the sect rules after a year had passed since he entered the sect.

One day, when Yan Zhengming opened the gate of the Library for Cheng Qian again, he couldn't help but ask the question he had wanted to ask.

"Copper Coin," Said the young master seriously. "What the heck are you planning to do? To cause trouble at the Southern Heavenly Gates⁴?"

"Master said, '*the stalk and the pillar, the leader and the beautiful Xi Shi⁵, and all sorts of strange things and fantastic phenomena—they are all one from the viewpoint of Tao.*' The Tao(paths) may take different shapes, it never departs from the original aim. So I plan to read more so as to complement to the cultivation methods of our sect." Cheng Qian prevaricated.

"You've just entered the cultivation world for a year, why would you even rush to read cultivation methods?" Yan Zhengming said out of curiosity.

“Last year, when we got back from the Demon Valley, didn’t first senior brother say that you’ll pluck all of Zipeng Zhenren’s feathers out? How can you defeat her if you don’t learn any cultivation methods?”

Yan Zhengming got more surprised. “Yes, I did say that. But I also said ‘one day’. The old hen is more than eight hundred years old, while I’m just sixteen. What’s the hurry? Perhaps I’ll be more powerful than her after seven or eight hundred years.”

He was definitely daydreaming...

During last year, Yan Zhengming’s height growth had accelerated, he was more and more like an adult male. Immaturity was disappearing from his behaviors while sanguinity and elegance was being brought out. After a look at his own slim arms and slowly-growing height and another look at first senior brother, Cheng Qian was more or less envious.

But his admire and appreciation wasn’t enough to make him endure Yan Zhengming’s aggravating narcissism.

That guy seemed to feel his beauty could even outshine Song Yu and shame Pan An⁶. Every reflective surface—puddles after the rain, shiny blades, could all be used by him as a mirror. From his facial expressions when looking at the mirror, Cheng Qian could infer that Yan Zhengming’s heart must be full of praises for himself.

For a man who took swords as a mirror, would it make any difference whether he’d cultivate eight hundred or eight thousand years?

Cheng Qian couldn’t think of anything to say to him and walked aside to continue the book he failed to finish last time.

Feeling that the sect was never going to go up again.

1. laodan: an old female character in Chinese opera. see more [here](#).
2. Copper Coin will be a nickname used by Yan Zhengming to call Cheng Qian.
3. A Chinese saying, if an owl comes to your house, it brings either good or bad fortune.
4. Southern Heavenly Gates: said to be the entrance from the mortal realm to immortal realm in mythologies.
5. Xi Shi: one of the renowned Four Beauties of ancient China. See more [here](#).
6. [Song Yu](#) and [Pan An](#) are two of the Four Handsome Men in ancient China, the other two are [Prince of Lan Ling](#) and Wei Jie. Though I didn't find the English wiki page for Wei Jie, I did find a funny video on YouTube called "[The Four Hottest Guys in Chinese History](#)".[ED: hubba hubaa]

Volume I Chapter 20

After a few paces, Yan Zhengming thought of something and turned back. He fished a package of milk cakes out of his sleeve and gave it to Cheng Qian churlishly. “Take it, little dwarf.”

Cheng Qian readily accepted it without saying thanks. He waved his hand impatiently, signaling Yan Zhengming to piss off quickly.

That day, he finished reading *Introduction to Charms*. After finishing the desserts, he suddenly felt like cleaning the ground floor of the Library.

The ground floor of the Library was like a dump. With no one coming for years, it had been covered by a thick layer of dust. All other floors, walls and shelves were carved with moth-proof and damp-proof charms, but only the ground floor was an exception. Everywhere you could see worm-eaten and page-missing books, whose contents were multifarious and disorderly. Cookbooks, gardening books, esoterica for brewing, and even a pornographic album—a buttock of the man on the head-page had been “eaten” by worms.

Perhaps due to the influence of first senior brother, Cheng Qian just felt disturbed by the messy sight, so he couldn’t help but decide to clean it up.

This cleaning rewarded Cheng Qian with a surprise—he found a wall bestrewn with small characters behind a broken shelf. Brushing the dust and cobwebs off, he finally saw the characters clearly.

The title was concise: *Diabolism*.

Cheng Qian was startled; he didn’t expect that such things existed in the Library of Fuyao Sect. He wavered, thinking that he shouldn’t peep. But when he lifted his foot to leave, he reminded himself of Lord Beiming.

Cheng Qian forced his eyes to not rove. He cleaned the ground floor up at a snail's pace and went upstairs reluctantly.

But shortly after he left, he regretted it and quickly ran back, reading the writings on the wall word by word.

That wall recorded hundreds of thousands of kinds of Diabolism, among which were those who became diabolical from sensuality, bloodthirstiness, obsession... Some volunteered and some were the result of coincidence. But Cheng Qian soon found that apart from a few disgusting cultivation methods, many of the others didn't seem so abnormal.

Among demonic cultivators, some people also practiced the Tao of sword and charms. And even the classification and practicing ways of charms weren't so different from what master had taught first senior brother.

Cheng Qian had been seeking the way of feeling qi in the natural world and absorbing it into his body, so he'd read many different types of cultivation methods. Thus, he was also surprised that the way of absorbing qi recorded here was very similar to those recorded in other cultivation methods; they all required "inner peace", "purity of mind" and such.

Cheng Qian was imbued with doubts. So the next day, he decided to ask his master.

Muchun Zhenren lifted his own head upon hearing the question. For a second, Cheng Qian felt a black mist flash across his eyes. But it was so quick that Cheng Qian thought perhaps his eyes were playing tricks on him.

"Diabolism?" Muchun Zhenren looked distracted. There was a silence before he asked, "Why are you asking about that?"

Yan Zhengming used a book of swordplay to cover his face and gave Cheng Qian a good kick under the desk, lest the brat give away that he'd taken him into the Library without permission.

Cheng Qian was banged into the stone desk by this kick and almost fell. Angered, he kicked back at once, leaving a black footprint on first senior brother's white satin shoe, and forgot to answer master's question.

Muchun Zhenren had already gotten used to them kicking each other under the desk, so he didn't pay much attention. He deliberated carefully and said, *"The stalk and the pillar, the leader and the beautiful Xi Shi, and all sorts of strange things and fantastic phenomena—they are all one from the viewpoint of Tao. There's no right way to the Great Tao. Different routes can lead to the same destination; demonic cultivators are just taking a different way. It's not strange that those ways have similarities."*

Cheng Qian found his words strangely familiar. Then he remembered—wasn't that what he said to swindle first senior brother in the Library?

As he thought about it, he hurried to lift his feet and avoided first senior brother's second kick.

Cheng Qian couldn't shake off the feeling that master was putting him off, so he questioned closely, "Master, why do we choose this one instead of the other?"

Muchun Zhenren looked at him silently. At length, he said meaningfully, "The plum tree by the road has fruited, but nobody goes to pick. Do you know why? Because it must be bitter!"

His words were like a pot of cold water pouring on Cheng Qian's head down to his tailbone, cooling off his inner depths thoroughly. He felt that master had seen through him completely.

After meeting Lord Beiming, the words “grandmaster of all magic” had been rooted into his mind. While in the Demon Valley, those monsters that were invincible in his eyes seemed to be unworthy of mentioning in Lord Beiming’s. Even the arrogant Zipeng Zhenren trembled in his wake.

Last time, when Li Yun talked about demonic cultivators, he was shouted down by Yan Zhengming. That enabled Cheng Qian to have a glimpse of people’s common attitude towards demonic cultivators. But anyhow, he was still attracted to seek the truth on his own.

Before being disabused today, Cheng Qian had thought a lot. He’d been thinking that since he already had a partiality, he would always be able to retort no matter what master said. However, the older, the wiser. Although Muchun Zhenren’s words seemed to weigh light, it actually dealt a heavy blow to Cheng Qian’s chest, shattering all of those excuses he’d came up with into pieces.

Cheng Qian’s curiosity evaporated in a flash. He inclined his head respectfully, saying, “Many thanks, Master.”

Cheng Qian’s comprehension exceeded Muchun Zhenren’s expectations. Feeling gratified and satisfied, he coughed to draw his apprentices’ attention and announced, “Apprentices, work hard these days; we’ll go on a trip.”

“What?”

“Where?”

Exclaimed the apprentices in chorus. Some were delighted and some were shocked—for someone like Han Yuan, a trip was of course like a festival; but for Yan Zhengming, it was like a thunderbolt out of the clear sky.

Muchun Zhenren said, “The decennial Celestial Market is about to open. You only have a very narrow view of the real cultivation world on Fuyao Mountain; it’s about time you open your eyes to the outside. And I’ll drop by at a few friends’. Since we all have apprentices, comparison is unavoidable, so make sure your master doesn’t lose face.”

Losing face... was also unavoidable.

Yan Zhengming was the first to understand what that meant. He sat square and said in all seriousness, “Master, in case I bring you into contempt, you may just take junior brothers and sister; I’ll stay to look after the house.”

“Taoist children can look after the house, it needn’t bother the first apprentice of our sect,” said Muchun, looking at him benevolently.

“No way! What if things go wrong in the mountain cave again? And what if some thieves covet the treasures here and come to steal?” Yan Zhengming retorted plausibly.

Muchun Zhenren replied unhurriedly, “Zipeng Zhenren and I have reached an agreement that day. She has sealed the cave, so you don’t need to worry. Plus, there are charms at the foot of the mountain and Taoist children guarding the gate; common thieves can’t go up.”

Yan Zhengming was about to continue arguing, but Han Yuan, who had been itching for the trip, couldn’t help but cut in, “Senior Brother, why are you acting like a young lady who never steps out of the house?”

Young master Yan’s face turned crimson from anger. He gave a sweeping jerk of his sleeves and flung off, feeling that the Hans couldn’t be more detestable.

Muchun Zhenren saw him off smilingly. Then stroking Han Yuan’s head, he

threatened him with the same kindly face, “Xiao-Yuan, since you made no effort to seek progress and haven’t remembered the sect rules so far, how about you stay and watch the house?”

Han Yuan suddenly lost his high spirit, like a frosted eggplant.

The next ten days, Fuyao Mountain was thrown into bedlam by the first apprentice, Yan Zhengming.

In order to not go on the trip, Yan Zhengming feigned illness and did everything he could to oppose his master, to the point that he nearly acted shamelessly to beg his master.

Unfortunately, Muchun Zhenren steadfastly refused to indulge him this time. His determination to get his first apprentice down the mountain was rather unshakable.

Han Yuan was exactly the opposite. In order to go out, he spent almost every second and minute on memorizing the sect rules. Nevertheless, this guy’s brain was probably not designed for this. Those characters made his poor head spin, yet he still couldn’t memorize them all. Cheng Qian had seen Han Yuan knock his head against the wall, as though he was demented.

And the master also became mysterious about his whereabouts.

That day, Cheng Qian spread a piece of rice paper on the Peaceful Stone¹, writing the *Scriptures on Clarity and Stillness* from memory.

Since the day he received the answer to his doubts from Master, he’d had a feeling that he seemed to have touched something, but it was wrapped in a thin film which he had no means to break for now, so he was a bit anxious.

Anxiety does no good to cultivation. Cheng Qian had to stop his other work

to write scriptures to calm his mind down.

But halfway through that, he heard a knock at the door. Xueqing went to answer it and after a minute came back with a chubby girl in his arms. That was exactly his junior sister, Puddle.

Puddle had half-demon blood, so she was naturally different from normal girls. She had a fondness for exertion of an unusual degree of activity—climbing the tree and up to the roof was just a cinch for her. But she couldn't speak yet. On this score, she was more like a clever and nimble animal full of intelligence. She was already able to recognize others' emotions by their tones and behaviors when she was still in an egg. But strangely, she was extremely slow when it came to specific speech.

Master said, it could be her demon blood at work; it wouldn't be strange if she couldn't speak even when she reached ten.

Puddle probably sneaked out when master didn't notice. There were only two things that could attract kids: food and playthings. Puddle usually preferred going to the Land of the Tender, because as a neat freak, first senior brother would always prepare a lot of good food to get rid of her as soon as possible. Once Puddle came, he'd use food as bait and ask her to bring disaster to others. Puddle secondly liked to go to Han Yuan's place—as Han Yuan himself was a “plaything” for her.

But she rarely came for Cheng Qian, because Cheng Qian didn't like playing with her.

And she was never interested in Li Yun—he had turned her into a toad.

As it was rare to have junior sister in Qing'an Dwelling, Cheng Qian was surprised. “Why are you here?”

“Ah ahh,” Puddle groaned. She went up to pull Cheng Qian’s trousers, and with a puff, her clothes were ripped up by something behind her. Startled, Cheng Qian turned her over and saw two wings of an unknown bird growing out of her back!

1. In case you forgot, Peaceful Stone is a huge stone in Cheng Qian’s yard, first mentioned in [Chapter 4](#)

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When a small pair of wings suddenly sprouted out of her back—even though they were a part of her, they definitely hurt the same way a normal kid's growing pains did. She probably hadn't been able to find Muchun Zhenren, or her first senior brother who was busy acting up, or even her fourth senior brother who had buried himself in memorizing the sect rules, so the only person she could grievously weep to was Cheng Qian.

Cheng Qian held Puddle's wings and observed them carefully for a few minutes, discovering that her wings were perfectly attached to her body. The only problem was that they looked kind of like chicken wings. A worry formed his mind: if master saw them, would he ask the cooks to make grilled chicken wings for a month on end?

"It's nothing to cry about. They're a gift from your mother." Cheng Qian clumsily picked her up, feeling that the girl seemed to have lost quite much weight—or at least, she wasn't as heavy as she looked.

Did her body get lighter after a part of it changed into a bird?

Normally, a good number of years of cultivation was required for monsters to change into human shape. Cheng Qian had caught a few glimpses of records about monster cultivators, but he just carelessly skimmed through them as if they were short stories since they didn't have any actual use to him.

Since Puddle was half-human and half-monster, she should have the inherent ability to change between human and monster forms, but he wasn't sure if she could freely do so as she wished.

Cheng Qian leveled his line of sight with little Puddle's, trying to say to her in a mild tone, "I don't know what to do, but you should try concentrating.

Just focus on making them smaller and hide them... ‘hide’, you know? Hey, Junior Sister, can you understand human language?”

Puddle stared at him with big innocent eyes, making it hard to tell whether she understood it or not. But seeing her muddled expression, Cheng Qian was prepared to believe that she didn’t understand anything.

He let out a heavy sigh. “Forget it, I’ll take you to find master.”

Puddle flapped over his arms, muttering “ah ah”. Then she clenched her fist, face reddening and eyes crossing from holding the breath.

Just when Cheng Qian thought she could deal with it herself, the small wings on Puddle’s back suddenly extended to seven or eight Chi long with a swishing sound. Feathers went all over the floor, and Cheng Qian was nearly slapped in the face by the enlargement of her wings.

Cheng Qian stared in astonishment at his junior sister who had changed into a giant bird. The back of Puddle’s clothes had been torn apart by her wings; luckily she was still at the age of wearing open pants. But that pair of wings was indeed too big, and the girl carrying them was so small that she almost couldn’t be seen amidst those wings. She looked like a large moth floating in the air—a truly weird scene.

“...”

Cheng Qian recovered from his shock and gazed in dismay at Puddle. “I asked you to make them smaller, not bigger!”

The little girl that Cheng Qian could have lifted with a sole hand had now become extremely heavy because of her giant wings. If he hadn’t been practicing swordplay for as long as he had, he would’ve hardly been able to carry her.

Puddle looked at him innocently. She swayed in Cheng Qian's arms, unable to keep her back straight because of the weight of the wings.

They still needed to find Master for help. Cheng Qian strenuously held her and walked toward the outside. However... Together, they got stuck in the door of Qing'an Dwelling.

Cheng Qian: "..."

Good Heavens...

Perhaps a girl of any age would never love to face the fact that she was stuck in the door and couldn't get out. Puddle wasn't a baby who cried often, but now looking injuredly at her wings, she cried out loud.

Normal kids could cry as they wanted, but Puddle's cry had the power of collapsing houses.

Cheng Qian was caught in a terrible mess. He tried his best to keep his balance and talk with her at the same time. "Having big wings doesn't mean you're fat... really. There, there, stop crying, try folding your wings. F-O-L-D, understood?"

Puddle looked at him, sobbing and sniffing. At Cheng Qian's comforting words, she gradually stopped tears.

Cheng Qian was temporarily relieved, harboring the distant hope that she had really understood this time.

But then his little junior sister astounded him by fully spreading her wings. She tried flapping her wings and, after activating some kind of hidden instinct, slowly rose into the air.

Her huge wings caused a whirlwind, blowing great clouds of dust into the sky. Several delicate orchids in the yard suffered, tilting topsy-turvy in the wind and sand. Cheng Qian couldn't open his eyes, and only felt that his clothes had been caught by a pair of hands.

Puddle's plump hands turned into claws which tightly clutched Cheng Qian. Cheng Qian immediately had a premonition.

And the next second, his premonition came true.

He was lifted into the sky by the mighty Puddle. His heart sank. Cheng Qian's first instinct was to struggle, but as she was flying higher and higher, he didn't dare to move anymore and only shouted his junior sister's formal name in the roaring wind. "Han Tan! Put me down!"

Puddle shut her ears to his screaming... even if she heard, she didn't seem to understand.

Never had Cheng Qian imagined that his very first experience of riding on clouds would happen like this. He wanted to laugh and weep all at once. He couldn't help wondering if, even though he had escaped death in the Demon Valley, he was going to end up dying after all under his own junior sister's claws.

With him in tow, Puddle flew over the gate of the Qing'an Dwelling and above the green-as-jade bamboo forest. Eventually, the entire Fuyao Mountain had disappeared beneath their feet.

Cheng Qian looked down at the panorama of a sweeping mountain ridge dyed in emerald green. On one side of the ridge was a slight slope softly drenched in light, while on the other side was a deep and gloomy valley hidden in the shadow of the mountains.

Countless caves and empty yards loomed along the mountains. Some had steles at the entrance, some had statues, and some had none. In the passage of thousands of years, people came and went, serving as the links between past and future. Those cultivation methods and all other records were buried deep in the Library as the blood and bones of history. They were probably the products of those almighty beings, talents, persons of virtues, or even villains...

But now, they were all no more.

The whole Fuyao Sect had only a weasel master left with several naughty apprentices, hiding behind the world of mortals. Only the whirlwind(Fuyao) was still spiraling up to the sky.

At this height the wind blew keenly, the sharp edge biting Cheng Qian. However, he gradually lost the haunting fear that had plagued him at first.

Cheng Qian exhaled a breath, letting it go together with the hatred that had smouldered in his heart for years.

He thought once again of Lord Beiming, and then of his parents who, probably, were counting the little money they had somewhere in the remote hinterland. Suddenly, he clearly understood the secret wishes that he had hidden in the depths of his heart.

Why did he aspire to be someone like Lord Beiming?

If someday he became an almighty being who freely traveled around the world, and to whom all creatures cowered and all human beings knelt... would his parents feel regretful when he returned home?

Right now, as he floated amongst the clouds and watched the caves and yards fade into distance, Cheng Qian's boggled heart suddenly emptied.

Their mortal lifetime only had thirty or fifty years left. Even if he incessantly schemed to return a slap to his parents' faces now, what would happen then?

Perhaps they would have already ceased to exist by the time he actually achieved something.

Or perhaps they would still be alive. But after more than half a lifetime had passed, even if they felt regret over the child they had sent away in the early years, would there be anything left other than regret?

If he had really been special to them, why would they have sent him away so ruthlessly?

In the first place there hadn't been any affection for him, much less something like lingering guilt or hoping for his forgiveness.

Cheng Qian suddenly relaxed his taut shoulders, throwing himself at the mercy of his junior sister.

He realized that the hatred he'd considered as profound to him, was by all means unfounded.

There was a wall breaking down in Cheng Qian's heart. In an instant, he heard the murmurs in the Fuyao Mountain again, like what he heard when first senior brother fell into meditation. But this time, those currents of air didn't brush past him; they ran into his body like rivers emptying into the sea.

Without catching or tarrying, the currents came and went like happiness and worries. They swirled into a circle, connecting Cheng Qian's body with the world as if he had always been a part of it.

It was hard to say how long had passed when the cry of a crane sounded. A white crane soared up into the sky from Fuyao Mountain and circled around them. The sniveling Puddle who had gotten lost in the air followed the crane and flew downwards through instinct. Led by the crane, she landed before the Unknown Hall, Muchun's residence.

Cheng Qian had still been in a trance when his feet touched the ground.

Muchun Zhenren helped Puddle out when she'd gotten stuck again in the gate of the Unknown Hall. After he caressed her wings, the wings were wrapped in some unknown power and eventually shrank into her body, leaving a pair of red birthmarks on her back.

Muchun didn't wake Cheng Qian up. He stood aside and waited, cuddling the fast-asleep Puddle. When the sun set to the other side of the mountain, Cheng Qian finally came back to himself, realizing that his legs had gone numb from standing.

Muchun Zhenren took a windproof lantern off from the gate and gave it to Cheng Qian to light his way back. "It's too late today, you can go back. Tomorrow you can stay to learn charms with your first senior brother after the swordplay practice."

Cheng Qian did a double-take when master said that. Surprised and muddleheaded, he asked, "Master, was... Was that energy feel?"

Muchun Zhenren nodded, beaming. "I was right about you. Of all my apprentices, your aptitude is the best."

Was that "of all my apprentices" really necessary?

Cheng Qian didn't know how to respond to this. Anyway, he didn't feel proud hearing his evaluation—if his excellent aptitude was the result of

comparing him with Yan Zhengming, Li Yun and Han Yuan, he didn't think this was something he could boast about.

Watching his figure walking steadily along the mountain path, Muchun Zhenren had a bittersweet mood. After all these years, he finally had an apprentice who was willing to make efforts. Stroking the crane's graceful neck, he said to himself, "If his martial brothers knew that, would they be stimulated?"

The white crane rubbed him and flew away, as if telling the sect leader—what are you wishfully dreaming about!?

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The next day, the whole mountain of Fuyao shook with the news that Cheng Qian was to stay and learn charms together with Yan Zhengming.

Cheng Qian's martial brothers surrounded him, all asking the same question: "What!? You can absorb qi already?"

Rubbing his ear, Cheng Qian felt a little smug. But before he let any emotion creep onto his face, he recalled, suddenly, how he should act as someone who followed the endless path of cultivation, and hurriedly threw cold water on his thoughts to cool himself down.

He nodded in an indifferent and humble way, and said matter-of-factly, "Mhm, sort of."

His words elicited mixed reactions from his martial brothers.

Li Yun's was the most normal.

Li Yun was not an unintelligent person, and considered himself quite clever. Although a person who indulged in heretical tricks and even innovated couldn't possibly be stupid, he simply didn't work hard at his studies despite his swordplay only being passably good. Just when he stopped playing with toads, he became fond of bugs.

Never had Li Yun thought that a junior brother who had entered the sect a year after him would cross the threshold earlier than he did, so his face showed a wretched expression. Li Yun silently put away his katydid cage... as well as a bottle of worm wine with unknown uses. That day, after finishing his swordplay practice, he went straight back to study rather than fool around with Han Yuan.

This action pleased Muchun Zhenren. He knew that Li Yun would feel terrible for a time, as anyone in his place would. But the sadness was only fleeting; it was the impetus that Cheng Qian gave him which would endure.

Nevertheless, the Master's satisfaction quickly dissolved when he discovered that Li Yun was the only one who reacted "normally".

For example, Han Yuan, who was undergoing torture by the detailed sect rules, was entirely apathetic about it.

Ever since he returned from the one-day trip to Demon Valley, his desire for energy feel had faded out. All he wanted now was to eat, drink and play.

"Energy feel? Why should I bother hurrying to learn it? Life is too short; you only live once," was his thought.

That was why Han Yuan didn't feel a trace of envy upon seeing that Cheng Qian, who had joined the sect alongside him, was already able to absorb qi. Instead, Han Yuan gloated over the other boy. He patted Cheng Qian's shoulder while taking his leave, saying, "Haha, extra classes! Your hard days are ahead of you!"

Therefore, Muchun threw Han Yuan out of the Mission Hall after picking him up with the wooden sword.

And there was 'the treasure of the sect', his first apprentice. Seeing that another table with a sandglass on top had been placed beside his, he sighed with feeling. "I only acquired energy feel after four years' worth of swordplay practice... Has it only been a year since Little Copper Coin's initiation?"

Muchun Zhenren thought that young master Yan had been stimulated, and would finally get his act together.

But beyond all expectations, that was only something Yan Zhengming murmured randomly. At the moment, he smiled from ear to ear and said with feigned affection, “Third Junior Brother, in the future we’ll be able to ‘consult’ each other for charms, just like we do for scriptures.”

“Two more milk cakes to get me to do your charms practices too? Senior Brother, stop dreaming,” answered Cheng Qian with a fake smile.

Yan Zhengming: “...”

Yah! This brat had only been treating him as a living key to the Library! But now that Cheng Qian could enter there on his own, Yan Zhengming had even lost this value to him!

Where was the dignity of the first senior brother?!

In the first class, Master gave Cheng Qian a burin for engraving and a tablet. There were two lines on the top and bottom of the tablet which were separated by a distance of one cun. What Cheng Qian had to do was carve a one-cun-long vertical line on the tablet.

“You’ll feel some resistance at first,” said Master. “Don’t be afraid; just take your time. It took a good half year for your first senior brother to do so.”

Yan Zhengming hacked awkwardly, aware that he wasn’t a good example.

Not until the burin touched the tablet did Cheng Qian understand that charms were never easily carved.

He had already noticed that the burin senior brother had used wasn’t ordinary—it already had charms on it, specially made for beginners.

Cheng Qian had read from *Introduction to Charms* that a charm beginner was incapable of connecting the charms with their own power, so they needed an auxiliary tool to help guide them.

Obviously this tool wasn't easy to get along with. The moment the tip of the burin touched the wood, the object in his hand became like a huge whirlpool, seeming to extract strength out from his body at a constant pace.

Startled, Cheng Qian's hand which held the burin halted of its own accord. After this brief pause, it couldn't move any further on the wood.

Fixing his eyes on the tablet, Cheng Qian found that he had left behind only a shallow notch, like a cat's scratch.

Muchun didn't tell Cheng Qian beforehand that the stroke couldn't break or stop. It must be carved in one smooth motion or all the previous efforts would go down the drain. Seeing that Cheng Qian had already suffered a setback, Muchun moved his feet and walked slowly over to point out his mistake.

He liked using this method when teaching Yan Zhengming, as he believed that a student's hindsight after committing a mistake would give them a more lasting impression.

But Muchun was an extremely slow teacher. Perhaps because he walked far too slowly, by the time he shuffled over to Cheng Qian, the boy had already tightened his grip around the burin and began his second attempt.

Once again, the burin frantically consumed his energy. Cheng Qian recited *Introduction to Charms* silently in his heart as he roused his newly-acquired energy feel, trying to make the spiritual energy around him sink into the energy sea¹ and flow along his arm to the burin.

Unfortunately, although Cheng Qian had grasped the concept, he had only just crossed the threshold. Even if he absorbed qi into his body, the amount he could gather was very limited and failed to keep pace with the amount that the burin extracted from him.

The first things to feel amiss were his legs and feet. Cheng Qian felt like he had walked a million miles on foot without rest. His feet started to numb, and soon afterwards an excruciating ache assailed them. When that pain became too much, it suddenly reverted back into such a profound numbness that he finally could no longer feel his feet at all.

Next was his waist. If it hadn't been for Cheng Qian's other hand pressing down on the desk, his torso would have collapsed because of the stinging spasm in his back. His heart thumped wildly, his spine seemingly bent by something invisible.

Finally, the head.

People often had hallucinations while suffering extreme exhaustion. Many a time did Cheng Qian come close to losing his grip on the burin—even so, when he looked down, he found there was still a half distance to go to reach one cun.

Cheng Qian was a little dizzy, but that word did not do justice to what he felt. Weariness permeated his entire body as if he had run twenty laps around the Fuyao Mountain.

No wonder his first senior brother, who preferred the light and shirked the heavy, would always scratch his head and seemed to be on tenterhooks every time he had to do charms practice.

However, Cheng Qian never did anything “step by step”; he always overachieved instead.

The harder it was, the more unyielding he became, and the further he went to the extreme. The burin made shrill sounds, raking through the tablet. If he went any further, Cheng Qian might even collapse. But, as always, he gritted his teeth and went for it, and though he was at the end of his rope he pushed the tool further down.

In a trance, he saw the illusion of his burin nearly reaching the finish line when an adult's hand firmly snatched his wrist.

The burin fell onto the desk with a clang. Cheng Qian's hand gave out and his muscles couldn't resist shaking because they were too taut to relax right away.

Muchun Zhenren held him with one arm and placed a hand at the middle of Cheng Qian's back, who blacked out. He could hardly bear clenching at Master's sleeve. Then he felt some warm current flow from his back to his limbs, and everywhere it passed, those numb and rigid parts seemed to be prickled again by numerous needles.

Cheng Qian broke out in a cold sweat. It felt like hundreds of ants nibbled at his heart. He panted so hard from the pain that the wheezing gasps for air became agonized coughs.

Patting his back worriedly, Muchun kept saying, "You, you..."

Yan Zhengming, who had been cutting his nails aside, looked at Cheng Qian with mouth-opened incredulity.

"Copper Coin, you..." said Yan Zhengming, stunned.

But words failed him. He repeated "you" for several times and finally uttered, "You... why are you so fierce?"

It took Cheng Qian a long while to come to. Muchun Zhenren let go of him and pulled the tablet out of his hand, staring at the line with a complex expression—the starting part was fairly smooth, from which it could be referred that Cheng Qian had mastered the key by himself. But it could also be seen that his strength soon weakened when the latter part began to curve, and apparently, he had drained himself before reaching half a cun. The notch was sometimes shallow and sometimes deep, but even when it looked about to break, it never did. If Muchun hadn't stopped him, Cheng Qian definitely wouldn't have let go until his life was consumed.

What a pig-headed child!

Frightened, Muchun Zhenren discovered that he'd nearly brought Cheng Qian to disaster by treating him like Yan Zhengming.

Charms practice was actually boring and harsh in the beginning because Muchun Zhenren wouldn't teach his students how to carve anything useful. For those who had just learned to absorb qi, Muchun Zhenren only allowed them to be guided by the burin so that they could exercise and broaden their channels².

Broadening one's channels wasn't a pleasant experience. It meant depleting the energy that had accumulated in one's energy sea over and over again.

It was like stretching: regularly stretching every day would do you good, but if you stretched too rashly then your muscle might break.

When young master Yan had just started, as soon as the tip of the burin poked a hole in the wood he'd begin to cry that his hands, bottom, and every part of his body ached as if he would soon be no more. But then he vigorously threw a tantrum—no matter what, he absolutely refused to touch charms again.

Muchun had no choice but to give step-by-step directions to him for two months, and had barely taught him the rudiments.

Even now, when Muchun Zhenren asked his first apprentice to go back and work on those practices, Yan Zhengming just played around with a fruit knife to scratch the tablet—as though his master didn’t know.

Muchun Zhenren’s face fell. He scowled at Yan Zhengming and then said to Cheng Qian, “You’ve been to the Library?”

Cheng Qian: “...”

Yan Zhengming: “...”

Muchun Zhenren took a seat on Cheng Qian’s desk and looked from close-up at this cub who was still wet behind his ears. “What else did you read besides *Introduction to Charms*?”

Cheng Qian dared not say a thing.

“Let me see, cultivation methods, swordplay, views of all schools, and probably...” Cheng Qian’s head dropped lower as each word came out of master’s mouth. Master walked around the desk and a word popped out, “Diabolism?”

Cheng Qian’s heart gave a giant leap. “Master, I...”

Muchun Zhenren stared at Cheng Qian’s tiny hair whorl, waiting for him to disavow or be scared to tears.

But this guy did neither. He stood there silently, and after a while said quietly, “I’m sorry.”

“How are you sorry?” Muchun Zhenren didn’t believe in the slightest that he was truly repentant.

Cheng Qian: “...”

As expected, he hadn’t meant it.

Yan Zhengming felt a little sorry for him. As the bond between Yan Zhengming and his martial brothers grew stronger, he found he could overlook the hateful parts of his third junior brother. Sometimes he still suffered homicidal urges toward Cheng Qian, but would always forgive him soon afterwards. He felt Cheng Qian was just a defensive and bad-tempered wolf whelp. When angered he’d give you a bite, but upon taking a closer look you’d find that he’d only just left shallow teeth marks on the skin. He knew who treated him well and who didn’t; he pretended to be fierce but, all in all, he usually took great care not to hurt anyone.

“Master, you can’t blame him. I took him into the Library. There’s no entertainment on the mountain, so I wanted to get a few delightful books for junior brother...” Yan Zhengming made excuses for him.

“Is *Introduction to Charms* included in those delightful books?”

“Maybe he just happened to catch a glimpse of it.”

“Zhengming, do you think of him as you?” Muchun Zhenren raised his eyebrows.

Yan Zhengming: “...”

He was not sure whether master was scolding Cheng Qian or him.

Muchun Zhenren sighed. Looking at Cheng Qian who peered tentatively at him, he felt that if he went on like this, he wouldn’t look like Zipeng

Zhenren's father anymore—he'd look like her grandfather!

He beckoned to Cheng Qian and wiped the cold sweat off the boy's forehead with his sleeves; though it was his intention to put on a more severe look, the end result was that he failed. He only looked a little cloudy.

“The seniors of our sect have walked 3000 paths, as is recorded in the Library,” said Muchun Zhenren. “Have you been to second-to-last floor? Definitely not, because you didn't think there would be anything useful to you. There, the records of the paths our seniors have walked, along with their fates, are kept. I know you seek your own path[*Tao*]; I just hope you don't choose the hardest one.”

Cheng Qian only partly understood. But he felt the heaviness in his Master's words, so he nodded.

Both Yan Zhengming and Cheng Qian received the punishment of copying scriptures thirty times.

Poor first senior brother. The blame of his junior brothers' mistakes seemed to always fall on him.

1. energy sea: a part of body where qi(spiritual energy) is stored.
2. a part of body, channels through which vital energy circulates

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Cheng Qian quickly ran off before Yan Zhengming could attempt to bribe the boy into taking the punishment for him as well.

Back at Qing'an Dwelling, Cheng Qian copied the scriptures till midnight. He only went out once for dinner after Xueqing called him, and stayed in his study for the rest time. Only Xueqing could make him go out in situations like these. One time, when Cheng Qian had brushed off Xueqing's request, the Taoist boy had decided to wait for him and had ended up starving until past midnight. From that point on, no matter how much he didn't want to be disturbed, Cheng Qian never ignored him a second time.

After finishing a long stretch of writing, Cheng Qian went to the Library under the light of the moon and stars.

This was his first time opening the gate of the Library by himself, as well as his first time walking in there with permission. Cheng Qian only lingered for a short while around the section of sword, cultivation method and charm books where he'd always stayed during his previous visits, before heading downstairs to the second-to-the-last floor as he'd been told to do by his master.

He was in fact good at agreeing on the surface but rebelling in the shadows. However, he hated doing that to his master.

This floor was still a secluded place, though slightly better than the one below it. Books were set out in a neat order, plainly rarely touched. Cheng Qian randomly picked out several volumes. The front side of each page was a portrait and the back side recorded this disciple's life story—his name, how he got accepted into the sect, his conduct, how he got into Tao, what

his Tao was, his rises and falls, when he joined the majority, and finally, the assessment given by others after his death.

Some disciples went missing and some were expelled from the sect, thus no follow-up stories were recorded for those.

Cheng Qian just read those stories leisurely in the beginning. But after a while, he began to feel drowsy and soon drifted off to sleep, leaning against the corner of the shelf. It was the sound of the book in his hands hitting the ground that startled him awake, and the next thing he knew he was already lying on the ground in a daze.

Though the Library was protected by damp-proof and moth-proof charms, the lack of sunlight for years had given it a very bleak aura. The cold ground made Cheng Qian shudder and at that moment, he caught sight of something under the shelf.

The slit between the bottom shelf and the ground was very narrow; only those with very slender arms could slip their hands inside and reach the object. Cheng Qian had fallen to the temptation of rolling up his sleeve and reaching his arm into the crevice, and after groping around he dragged something out.

It was also a portrait, but it strangely seemed to have been cut into two pieces with its lower half missing. Only the upper part of the man in the portrait could be seen. He was wearing an old robe, but he didn't look shabby or miserable. Though the painter was unknown, the man's graceful bearing had been vividly brought into life with only a few strokes of ink.

Who... was this senior?

Cheng Qian turned the portrait over, but there was not a single character on the back.

He didn't know drawing very much, but from a layman's perspective, he thought the art was quite good. It didn't seem to be a failed work... So why wasn't there even a single character on it?[1](#)

Cheng Qian was puzzled. But since it was hard for him to be interested in the story of someone he didn't know, he quickly lost interest, put away the portrait, went upstairs where he picked out several books to read back in his residence.

Time flew by. On the 6th day of 6th month of the lunar calendar, the master and his apprentices concluded their mind-numbing routine classes and marched down the mountain in a great procession.

Sure enough, the "great procession" was created single-handedly by the first senior brother, Yan Zhengming.

This guy had prepared several large carriages: one for carrying him, and the rest for carrying his luggage—which was essential for living in his eyes, yet purely a pile of trash in others'.

Except for him, everyone else—including the sole girl, Puddle—only carried a wooden sword and a traveling bag, though Cheng Qian also took two bundles of books with him which he hung on his saddle.

Yet despite all that, young master Yan still complained incessantly. He hadn't left Fuyao Mountain for a whole seven years; the arduousness of the journey was killing him.

Young master Yan didn't think there was any problem with a man sitting in a carriage alone in the daytime, but he felt sorry to see his master and junior brothers and sister being exposed to the sun and wind. That was why he popped his head out and said to his skinny master on the back of a skinny horse, "Master, please get on the carriage with junior brothers; it's too hot outside."

“My apprentice, you’re truly filial,” Muchun Zhenren sighed.

Ultimately this young man’s character had grown as he aged. Despite his worsening narcissism, Yan Zhengming did become more sensible than before—for instance, the young master Yan who never knew how to read other people’s faces before had actually caught a hint of sarcasm in his master’s words.

But in the end, Master refused his proposal. He just threw Puddle who had been in the basket on his back into Yan Zhengming’s carriage, and let her drool all over her first senior brother. Muchun Zhenren turned his head and saw Cheng Qian. This third disciple of his still did not look like he had recovered since the charms’ backfire on him with his pallid face.

Therefore Muchun insisted to him, “Get in your senior brother’s carriage for a rest. Don’t pretend to be strong. You can read books inside.”

“Right. Little Copper Coin, come to play with junior sister. There’s enough room for you two to roll about,” said Yan Zhengming.

Cheng Qian refused him without the least hesitation and didn’t forget to have a dig at him. “Senior Brother, you’re being too modest. Look at this fleet of carriages—it could even match the wedding procession of an imperial concubine.”[2](#)

This boy always took his good will ungratefully! Yan Zhengming furiously pulled down the curtain, not wanting to see that little bastard again.

Cheng Qian remembered that master had said first senior brother got into Tao through swordsmanship, and such cultivators mostly had a strong will—except a few eccentrics like Yan Zhengming.

But he himself was different. Master said he got into Tao through heart.

What was “got into Tao through heart”?

This question had been plaguing Cheng Qian’s head. He’d spent a few days in the Library, yet still was not very clear about what the “heart” referred to. With various opinions being widely divided, he didn’t know which to trust. But all those divergent views had mentioned the same point: “those who got into Tao through swordsmanship exercise their physique; those who got into Tao through heart exercise their mentality.”

To exercise mentality was to temper one’s willpower. Concentration, fortitude, pain, stamina and so on, were all included. If his willpower was strong enough, a cultivator could follow his heart’s desire without deviating. Since Cheng Qian had just crossed the threshold, the most basic way he could find to exercise his mentality was to mortify himself.

Therefore, he had already decided to consider this sweltering journey as a way to practice asceticism.

After three days’ travel, the master and his apprentices arrived at the shore of the East Sea.

Nearby was a small town named Dragon-Taming Town where there were many shops selling all kinds of magic tools, may they be real or fake. In fine weather, one could see celestial mountains peeking in the distance when standing at the seaport. This town was thronged with tourists from all over the country whatever the season.

But never had it been as bustling as it was this year.

By the time they arrived in town, all inns and hotels had been filled to capacity. Yan Zhengming suggested sending a Taoist child to ask around about the most expensive hotel in the area, planning to book several deluxe rooms whatever the price.

Master turned a deaf ear to his lousy idea.

The old weasel knew the way well. He led them nonstop to the southeast outskirt of Dragon-Taming Town, toward a row of thatched cottages.

Aesthetically, the architectural style of those shacks was similar to that of a stable. Several chickens idled around the door, and next to the cottages was a pigsty built with stones where a fat pig was staring curiously at young master Yan's ostentatious fleet of carriages.

Yan Zhengming pushed open the carriage door, scanned the environment with an unpleasant frown and reached his arm to poke Cheng Qian. "What the heck is this place? An outhouse?"

By now, he had forgotten that he'd just been irritated by Cheng Qian. Obviously, Yan Zhengming wasn't the sort of narrow-minded person who bore a grudge. Perhaps his main occupation was to wallow in his own beauty in every possible way.

Cheng Qian gave him a sympathetic look, saying, "I just saw Master go knock on the door—I'm afraid this is where we're going to put up tonight."

Yan Zhengming: "..."

He'd rather sleep in the carriage.

Nothing was more depressing than traveling for him. After a long time, the indignant Yan Zhengming thought of his responsibility as first senior brother. He gazed around and grumbled at Li Yun, "Where's Underbite?"

Since the day Li Yun was motivated by Cheng Qian, he'd shied away from hankering for fun and games. He had followed Cheng Qian's example of holding a book all the time while on horseback during the whole trip and even upon hearing that question, pointed somewhere without looking up. In

the direction he pointed to stood a big wolfberry tree at the door of a cottage, and from the gap of the leafy branches popped a funny head.

Han Yuan shouted to his senior brothers who were wearing different expressions, “Looking for me? I’m picking wolfberries for you. There’re so many and they’re so sweet!”

This idiot...

Yan Zhengming flung the carriage door shut with the determination that he’d rather die than get off the carriage. Nevertheless, he got off in the end—because his junior sister, who wasn’t yet able to communicate with others, had peed in his carriage due to the long journey.

Because of that, Yan Zhengming’s face remained dark until midnight.

The group of thatched cottages had a name which described themselves very accurately: “Shabby Inn”.

There was a line of characters on each side of the door. On the left it said, “Three coins per night,” and on the right, “Stay or piss off.” A fierce-looking monster was drawn on the door. There wasn’t even a servant to welcome the guests. That was how they ran an inn?

The shopkeeper didn’t show up until master had knocked at the door for a short while. It was a burly man who was more than eight Chi high, who looked exactly like a small mountain—his height and his waist had practically the same measurements!

With his hair and beard sticking up, his face looking like a bronze basin, and his thick lips curled downwards, he was the spitting image of a debt-collecting scoundrel.

Li Yun's horse was frightened by his appearance. It neighed and trotted backwards a distance of one Zhang, nearly hitting Yan Zhengming's carriage with panic written all over its face.

The master, however, amiably cupped a fist in his hand in front of his chest and smiled. "Brother Wen Ya, long time no see."

The apprentices' and Taoist children's mouths all fell open, feeling that they couldn't face the two characters "Wen(tender)" and "Ya(elegant)" anymore.

The "iron tower" had looked irritated when opening the door, but when he realized that the visitor was Muchun Zhenren, his countenance eased up a little. He mumbled, "Xiao-Chun? Why are you here?"

This form of address gave Cheng Qian a big shock, and he nearly fell off his horse, his skin crawling.

"Come in." Wen Ya glanced at young master Yan's impressive procession and scowled slightly. "Are you escorting a bride to the groom's home?"

Li Yun, Cheng Qian and Han Yuan simultaneously looked at Yan Zhengming, sniggering. But the latter only took out his new sword and with an evil grin, whipped Li Yun's timid horse across its bottom. The poor creature lifted its front legs and leapt forward hysterically, making the pig snort and startling the chickens in front of the door until they flew about, before setting off on a gallop.

Yan Zhengming then swaggered into the shabbiest cottage he had ever stepped foot in with a hopeless sadness in his heart.

1. Traditional Chinese drawings usually have inscriptions on them.

2. It is a ritual for traditional marriage in China that the bride will be escorted on a sedan form her parents' home to the groom's by a wedding procession.

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Volume I Chapter 24

That day, young master Yan didn't even come out of his room to take his meals—if those meals could even be called human food.

He sullenly grabbed some desserts, and struggled to fall asleep in the evening.

Though the Taoist children had cleaned his room many times, Yan Zhengming still thought that the quilt stank and that the hard bed was uncomfortable. The room was muggy and suffocating, and no matter which incense Yan Zhengming burnt it couldn't drive away his sullenness.

In short, this damnably shabby place made young master Yan question his entire life. No longer able to contain himself, he rose up from the bed, preparing to bother his master on the principle that if he was unhappy, he'd make other people unhappy too.

Leaving the Taoist children behind, Yan Zhengming stormed around the inn like a headless chicken.

Because the inn was too shabby and the shopkeeper looked like a bandit, nobody other than them had put up in this inn. As he passed by the empty yard and the many vacant thatched cottages which looked like haunted houses, Yan Zhengming found his poor master in the innermost one.

But after spotting Muchun Zhenren sitting with the shopkeeper, Wen Ya, he didn't rush forward.

It was one thing to trouble master when he was alone, but Yan Zhengming didn't want to humiliate him in other people's presence.

However, as Yan Zhengming had gone through the trouble of finding him, he was unwilling to just go back. Young Master Yan dithered for a while before he reached into his pocket and took out a cicada's wing.

Needless to say, this thing was made by Li Yun. There were five holes on the cicada's wing so that after threading a line through the holes it could be worn on the neck. To a certain degree, this wing could impede other people's senses so as to conceal the user's existence.

Yet surely just what sophisticated toys was Li Yun capable of making? There was a limit to the wing's function. It would have an assured effect if the wearer were standing far enough and was sufficiently careful, but functions like vanishing the wearer or making the wearer completely invisible were impracticable.

After rebuking Han Yuan for using it to steal a bird's eggs, Yan Zhengming had taken this convenient tool for his own.

Yan Zhengming rounded to the other side of the cottage and climbed over the fence of the broken yard. He hid behind the cottage, waiting to jump in and argue with his master as soon as Wen Ya left.

Yan Zhengming had maintained his swordplay practice all year round, so he was more dextrous than a normal person despite not working all that hard. And under the cover of the cicada's wing, he successfully managed to not disturb the two Taoists.

Yan Zhengming found a place to sit down so that he could wait for his master to send the guest away, and so that Yan Zhengming could finally complain to him.

Right at this moment, their conversation travelled into Yan Zhengming's ears.

Wen Ya said, “I had a vision last year. I was wondering what it was about, and now you tell me it’s the Heavenly Monster. The birth of the Heavenly Monster, the rage of the Monster King, and the rebellion of those monsters—they must have resulted in a bloodbath in the Demon Valley. If HE had failed to put down the revolt and take the egg out... A Heavenly Monster born in blood... Tsk, it would have been more than a disaster for only Fuyao Mountain—speaking of which, where’s the Heavenly Monster? Did it hatch?”

Muchun Zhenren calmly answered, “It hatched and it’s right here in your inn. I’ll have to see her in a moment, lest she piss on your bed.”

Wen Ya: “...”

Presently Muchun Zhenren spoke again in a sterner voice when Wen Ya was distracted. Yan Zhengming could even hear that his volume lowered. “Do you know who that demonic cultivator with the title of Beiming was? And what connection did he have with our sect? Why was he willing to save our sect at the cost of one of his spiritual souls?”

Wen Ya: “Didn’t he tell you?”

Muchun Zhenren sighed. “Even though he is a strong demonic cultivator, sacrificing one’s soul would inflict serious damage on anyone. I haven’t seen him since that day.”

Hearing that, Wen Ya pondered before he said, “He asked me to hand THAT over to you and claimed to be a deserted disciple of Fuyao Sect. I thought you knew him.”

Muchun Zhenren said, “There have been many betrayers since the establishment of our sect. I even know the backgrounds of two lord Beimings, and there are yet many others who have kept their identities hidden... After all these years, how could I know who he is?”

“He hasn’t shown ill intentions, at least,” said Wenya. “It’d be better for you to think about how to deal with your old friend rather than worrying about a fragmented soul.”

Wen Ya deliberately lowered his voice on “old friend”, which sounded gloomy and deep with a strong foreboding, the sound conveying this big man’s fear.

Yan Zhengming was shocked.

Old friend?

When Muchun Zhenren remained silent for what seemed like ages, Yan Zhengming unconsciously straightened and craned his neck closer.

Finally, Master spoke.

“Brother Wen Ya,” said Muchun Zhenren calmly. “If I... please take care of these kids for me.”

Wait, what did that mean?

Yan Zhengming had spent all the intelligence he’d gained from the last sixteen years on this moment. He even forgot he was eavesdropping. His mind was racing with bated breath.

Wen Ya laughed mockingly. But Yan Zhengming didn’t know who exactly he was mocking.

“Come on. I’m just a nobody; how can I shoulder such a responsibility?” said Wen Ya. “What a place your Fuyao Mountain is! There’s always an evil cultivator in every generation. How could a nonentity like me take control of it? And also, haven’t you got a blockhead who was willing to carve

charms onto his own soul to defuse the disaster for you? You may as well ask him for help,” said Wen Ya.

Muchun Zhenren knew what he meant, so he switched the subject tactfully.

They started chit-chatting faux-sprightly. The two middle-aged men spouted off like a gushing river about all the trifling stories in the cultivation world from the past 500 years.

When numbness struck Yan Zhengming’s legs, he was sure that he couldn’t obtain any more useful information. He only then cautiously stood up and slipped away.

In the hot June which seemed like a heated stove, his palms were all cold and sweaty.

Yan Zhengming left his master’s cottage and went straight to Cheng Qian’s place. It was already late in the night and Cheng Qian had already gone to bed. But now he was forcibly pulled out of his quilt by Yan Zhengming.

Being woken up from sleep for no reason, Cheng Qian glowered at Yan Zhengming, thinking of picking a fight with him.

Yan Zhengming, however, didn’t look at him at all. He picked up the clothes at the side of the bed and threw them at Cheng Qian’s face, solemnly ordering him, “Put on your clothes and come with me.”

His forehead knotting with a frown, Yan Zhengming paced around Cheng Qian’s room anxiously. He was so distracted that he neither noticed that the clothes at Cheng Qian’s bedside had already been worn by him today, nor found fault with the pickle-like wrinkles on Cheng Qian’s belt. He just kept urging Cheng Qian with a heavy heart.

From this detail, Cheng Qian determined that Yan Zhengming had something to say—something that, in Yan Zhengming’s eyes at least, was serious. He hastily put on an outer robe but before he could comb his hair, Yan Zhengming dragged him away towards Li Yun’s and Han Yuan’s places with his hair still in disarray.

However, they didn’t find Han Yuan. Ever since they gone down the mountain, that boy had been running around like a wild horse. At this moment, he was probably strolling somewhere around town.

Li Yun was still awake and working hard under the light of an oil lamp. Seeing the two coming together, he was quite surprised. But when his eyes fell upon the cicada’s wing on Yan Zhengming’s neck, he asked with a little doubt, “First Senior Brother... have you just eavesdropped?”

Yan Zhengming gave up looking for Han Yuan. He sat down in Li Yun’s room and absentmindedly told his junior brothers what he had just heard from Master while repeatedly wiping a porcelain teacup from the inside to the outside.

Cheng Qian exchanged a glance with Li Yun, took the porcelain teacup whose glaze was almost wiped out by Yan Zhengming, and poured a cup of cold tea which seemed to have been in the teapot for days. Yan Zhengming unconsciously picked it up and drank from it.

Frowning, Li Yun asked, “First Senior Brother, is it that... you know the ‘old friend’?”

Li Yun actually had a subtle mind; he was just too fond of heretical tricks, and lacked concentration. After contemplating the tea in the cup for a while, Yan Zhengming nodded. “Yes.”

“As I thought, it must be a demonic cultivator,” said Cheng Qian confirmed.

Yan Zhengming: “How do you know that?”

In fact, Cheng Qian had already thought it was strange—after listening to Master several more times while reading scriptures, he noticed that even though Master often talked nonsense, and even though contradictions existed in the different schools’ scriptures, one concept that ran through every theory was that “the great Tao is shapeless and conforms to the course of nature.”

Since it is shapeless, there is no right or wrong to it. All creatures reach the same goal by different routes. After his initiation, Cheng Qian had never heard any bad words about demonic or monster cultivators from his master.

Instead, it was the good-for-nothing first senior brother who bitterly abhorred them.

Cheng Qian: “When second senior brother talked about demonic cultivators last year in the Demon Valley, you shouted him down. That’s when I started to I feel that... first senior brother seemed to particularly ostracize Diabolism.”

Yan Zhengming waved his hand. “I was just afraid that he would misguide you.”

“Oh. Seems like you’re not afraid you’ll misguide us by sleeping in every morning class,” said Cheng Qian without blinking an eye.

Yan Zhengming: “...”

This bastard did have a sharp tongue!

Yan Zhengming rolled his eyes at Cheng Qian. After a period of silence, he said slowly, “I probably didn’t tell you how I met master. When I was 7 or 8 years old, I had thrown a tantrum because of some matter which I don’t

remember now. I was very angry back then so I ran away, and after leaving my retainers' sight, I was abducted."

As the saying goes, as the boy is, so is the man. That was definitely something first senior brother would have done.

"It was a man that abducted me, a pretty handsome man. But he looked like he was desperately sick with a dead atmosphere," said Yan Zhengming as he recalled. "He took us to a deserted Taoist temple."

Cheng Qian blinked his eyes. "Us?"

"Us," Yan Zhengming said. "There were 4 or 5 kids that were nearly the same age as me, but only one girl, the rest were all boys. That man was a demonic cultivator. I saw him seize the girl by her neck and pull out her three spiritual souls and seven corporal souls from her forehead instead of killing her directly. What was surprising was, after all that, the girl was still breathing and her heart was jumping even though her body was just an empty container. She struggled at death's door for seven or eight days before she finally died. That was... my first time seeing someone die."

That Yan Zhengming could still look back on every detail of that memory after nearly ten years proved how deeply it had been imprinted in his mind.

Li Yun was flabbergasted. "Why would that demonic cultivator kill kids?"

"He tossed the girl's souls into a lamp with stinky kerosene. The flame flared up and never died out. Next it came to our turn. But he didn't kill us directly either. He took blood from us every day and poured it into the kerosene. Except for the feeling of wanting to throw up, we didn't feel anything terrible at first. But young children don't have a lot of blood. Just a few days later, some kids couldn't hold out and died."

As Yan Zhengming retold the account, Cheng Qian found it more and more familiar to the ear. He blurted out, “Is that a Soul-Consuming Lamp...”

Li Yun: “What?”

Yan Zhengming suddenly changed into a serious look. “How do you know that?”

Cheng Qian: “I’ve read about it in the Library. Soul-Consuming Lamp could refine souls. The lowest class uses girl’s souls as a wick and uses refined corpse oil with boy’s blood as kerosene. After being burnt for 49 days, the girl’s souls would be refined into a ghost shadow. This is a certain type of diabolism called ghostism.”

Yan Zhengming shot his hand out and gripped Cheng Qian’s wrist. Stern in both voice and countenance, he said, “Cheng Qian, I opened the gate just for you to see how to bleed others and refine their souls!?”

That didn’t terrify Cheng Qian. He said with perfect assurance, “It’s not forbidden by master anyway. There are numerous different kinds of diabolism, I just browsed over a few.”

“Enough.” Li Yun was very clever. Seeing that they had strayed off topic, he immediately pulled the conversation back to its path. “First Senior Brother, please continue. What happened to the homicidal demonic cultivator later? Did master save you, and so you became his apprentice?”

Yan Zhengming shot a fierce stare at Cheng Qian. “Master did save me, but that’s not the point...”

On that point, Yan Zhengming involuntarily paused. “Master is acquainted with that demonic cultivator. I heard Master address him as ‘Senior Brother’.”

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Volume I Chapter 25

Yan Zhengming's words stunned Li Yun and Cheng Qian. Li Yun hesitantly asked, "So... he's our martial uncle?"

Upon the utterance of his words, Li Yun felt like he was possessed by Han Yuan, and promptly kneaded his forehead in regret.

"Of course not, did the sect rules all go down your stomach? Once you've stepped onto the path of malevolent Taos like ghostism or slaughterism, you shall be expelled from the sect and never be allowed to return," said Yan Zhengming sternly.

Silence filled the room.

Cheng Qian pulled himself back after a minute or two and murmured, "That means... the old friend is probably..."

He paused involuntarily, seemingly not sure how to address the person. He thought a good while before it came to him. "Err, former martial uncle."

"Who else could that be?" said Yan Zhengming impatiently. "Fuyao Mountain isn't the supreme headquarters of demonic cultivators."

"First Senior Brother, what's your opinion on this? Shall we just go ask master tomorrow?" Inquired Li Yun tentatively.

Yan Zhengming shook his head. Despite Master's talkativeness, most of what he said was rubbish. When it came to something serious, he'd be like an oyster with his mouth zipped tight. Yan Zhengming definitely didn't believe that they could pry something out of him. He deliberated for a while and said with a glimmer of hope, "Is there a way... that can let us find master's whereabouts when he tries to throw us off?"

Cheng Qian had hung around the Library all day long. After he heard what Yan Zhengming said, a big heap of strategies came flooding into his head. But he rejected them one by one and at last, he found that the chances were near impossible—for them to track their master, the first condition was that one of them had to be more powerful than their master.

“I think it’s hopeless,” Cheng Qian said. “Unless second senior brother could get another toad and make master carry the smell of Toad Liquid on his body—but I’m afraid that second senior brother’s toad would fake death again upon meeting a strong demonic cultivator.”

“Don’t look at me; I have no idea,” Li Yun shrugged. “Once confronted with a formidable enemy, any creature with intelligence would be terrified. The ones that aren’t are too dumb to be utilized to track people.”

“Must have intelligence and won’t be terrified...” Yan Zhengming pondered over Li Yun’s words. “Hey, what do you think of Puddle?”

Cheng Qian rolled his eyes—neither did he believe that his junior sister had intelligence nor did he think that she wouldn’t be terrified. But the next second he suddenly got what Yan Zhengming meant. Though they didn’t have the ability to track their master, they could try to do something to their junior sister.

Since master always took the kid with him and she couldn’t understand human language yet, it definitely wouldn’t be found out.

After some discussion, the three got a batten and whittled it down to a slim piece. The well-read Cheng Qian provided the idea and Yan Zhengming was in charge of the manual operation, thus they got off to the rocky start of carving the tracking charm.

This tracking charm was very primary because Cheng Qian hadn’t read to the advanced part. But even so, first senior brother’s skills were so

unexpectedly bad that he failed again and again.

Yan Zhengming shook his aching hand, feeling that he'd never been so diligent even in formal charm classes. He couldn't help but vent his anger on Cheng Qian.

“What the fuck is this crap? Should I really rely on your memory?” seethed Yan Zhengming, staring at Cheng Qian.

He who couldn't shit blames the latrine pit¹—Cheng Qian swallowed back this vulgar sentence and stuffed it into his eyes, looking first senior brother up and down with an explicitly disdainful gaze.

With Yan Zhengming and Cheng Qian quarrelling and Li Yun desperately trying to make peace, they finally finished carving the batten by midnight.

Yan Zhengming handed the baton to the yawning Li Yun. “I'll leave this all to you from here. You try to attach this to her. Can't believe I stayed up so late with you guys because of this goddamn thing.”

Who the heck was to blame? This was really a case of “the thief cries the thief.”

Cheng Qian was so sleepy that he felt lopsided. Leaving behind the “Niangniang”², Cheng Qian doddered towards his own room. But when he just got to the door and was about to enter, he was called by Yan Zhengming who caught up.

“Wait, Xiao-Qian. I have a few words for you.”

Yan Zhengming's height was growing fast this year as if he'd eaten some fertilizer, his voice gradually deepened, and he no longer sounded clear and melodious like a teenager. As long as he himself didn't bluster loudly, he'd sound like a real mature man.

Cheng Qian had seldom heard his voice so solemn. He turned around, looking at Yan Zhengming puzzledly.

The young man stood straight behind him, drenched in the moonlight. His restlessness and willfulness seemed to be reduced by and melted into the dark. For this moment, Yan Zhengming didn't look like himself.

There was a minute of hesitation before he said, "I left something out just now. In fact... I heard another sentence from Wen Ya."

Cheng Qian frowned.

"He said that Fuyao Mountain was beautiful and bred talents, there would always be a devil in every generation..." Yan Zhengming's voice faded out. He regarded Cheng Qian for a fraction of a second, feeling that this boy was like a fragile bamboo which appeared to easily break off, but was actually cold and hard. Nobody could tell how many difficult feelings he'd hidden in his heart. Yan Zhengming dropped his head a bit, whispering softly, "You know where your limit is, don't you?"

Hearing that, Cheng Qian didn't dig at him. He didn't talk back either. He could hear the sincere care in Yan Zhengming's words. Whether it was senior brother's groundless fear or not, he had this feeling that Yan Zhengming said that just for Cheng Qian's own sake. As first senior brother was always slothful and pampered, most of the time his junior brothers just gave in to him, thus Cheng Qian rarely found a sense of senior brotherhood in him.

Until this moment.

Cheng Qian replied with a silent nod.

Yan Zhengming let out a relieving breath. He reached out his hand, placed it on the back of Cheng Qian's head, and gently pushed him into the cottage.

“That’ll be the best,” said Yan Zhengming softly. Then he returned to his old self and pointing at Cheng Qian’s creased clothes, he said, “Get your clothes changed tomorrow. Don’t you think they resemble cleaning rags?”

Cheng Qian probably didn’t agree with him—his answer was a slam of the door, which blocked Yan Zhengming outside.

This night was indeed eventful. Sending Yan Zhengming away, Cheng Qian threw himself onto the bed but was woken again when he had just fallen asleep.

Compared to first senior brother who just kicked the door open and pulled him out of the quilt, Han Yuan was more of a nuisance—he stealthily knocked at the window lattice like a woodpecker pecking a tree, which made Cheng Qian terribly perturbed upon waking up.

Even when on the horseback, Cheng Qian didn’t drop his charm practices. These days, he’d suffered from the pain of growing and broadening his channels as well, which resulted in bad sleep quality. Being woken up twice tonight, Cheng Qian fruitlessly wished to kill the noise maker with a knife.

Han Yuan didn’t walk in through the front door. Under Cheng Qian’s expressionless gaze, he crawled in through the window and slumped down on Cheng Qian’s bed, whispering, “Guess what I saw just now?”

Cheng Qian didn’t want to guess. He fell back into his bed, face upward, and tucked himself into the quilt without saying a word.

“Hey, don’t sleep. Get up! I’ll show you something rare,” Han Yuan threw himself upon Cheng Qian and pulled his quilt with both hands. “You’ve definitely not seen it before. Xiao-Qian? Xiao-Qian!”

Cheng Qian doggedly refused to stick his head out and shouted to Han Yuan from underneath the quilt, “Go find Niangniang!”

Han Yuan was shocked. “You must be joking. I dare not. He’s bound to throw me into the censer.”

“Then go find Li Yun!” Cheng Qian rolled to the other side of the bed.

“I did,” said Han Yuan, complaining. “I almost set off firecrackers by his ears, but he just wouldn’t wake up.”

Cheng Qian: “...”

So he was the easiest to wake up and least likely to get angered!?

Han Yuan successfully pulled the quilt off Cheng Qian. Ignoring his restrained anger, he whispered into his ear, “Have you seen a ghost before?”

Cheng Qian was about to kick him down when he heard this sentence. His knitted eyebrows suddenly twitched. “What?”

A few moments later, Cheng Qian slipped out of the Shabby Inn with Han Yuan.

“There’s a fair in the town recently, so I hung out a little late,” said Han Yuan as they moved. “I took a shortcut on the way back—this way, mind your steps.”

Cheng Qian followed Han Yuan disorientedly. He gingerly avoided the mud on the road, unable to understand how Han Yuan got familiar with the environment in such a short time. Could it be a special talent of beggars who travelled extensively? Han Yuan was leading him to somewhere more out-of-the-way. Cheng Qian carried his wooden sword with one hand and gripped the burin which he used to practice charms with the other hand, leaving marks along the way by making small piles of stones, because he didn’t completely trust Han Yuan.

In the cold wind, Cheng Qian's muddled brain was beginning to clear. He only then realized that he was influenced by first senior brother's words about ghostism that he subconsciously followed Han Yuan out upon hearing the word "ghost".

Getting out to see a ghost with a little beggar, that was...

Cheng Qian wondered if he had been infected by Han Yuan with some stupid disease.

All of a sudden, Cheng Qian shivered from head to toe.

Han Yuan led him to a river. He didn't have the energy feel, so he only thought the shore was cold because of the late night dew.

But Cheng Qian already felt something abnormal about this chill as he had smelled a trace of an ominous stench in the air.

Cheng Qian gave a start. The last bit of drowsiness vanished.

"There can't be real danger," Cheng Qian calmly thought to himself, picking the leaf that had fallen on his shoulder and holding it in hand. "Or how could Han Yuan run back just now?"

Han Yuan cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Hey, where are you? I brought my little senior brother. Come out."

Cheng Qian rose to cover Han Yuan's mouth right away. He asked gnashing his teeth, "What did you do?"

Han Yuan: "Umm... ummm..."

Mouth muffled, Han Yuan made eyes at something behind Cheng Qian. Cheng Qian looked back and his breath almost stopped.

A phosphorescent light had appeared behind him when he didn't notice, and a male ghost with a pale face was standing there, his eyes dull and remote.

Cheng Qian swiftly pulled Han Yuan behind him. "Who's there?"

Han Yuan finally struggled free of Cheng Qian's hand. He patted Cheng Qian's shoulder carelessly, saying, "It's OK, don't be afraid. I was also startled by him at first. But I soon found him stagnant and quite interesting."

With that, he bent to pick up a small stone and tossed it before Cheng Qian could stop him. That stone flew straight through the ghost's body and bounced twice on the ground. The male ghost looked down at the stone blankly as though he was sleepwalking.

Han Yuan said to Cheng Qian smiling broadly, "See?"

Cheng Qian only wanted to give him a slap in the face—when the stone went through the ghost's body, he clearly sensed that smell. It was like stink but mixed with some disgusting bloody smell.

Corpse oil and boy's blood...

At the moment Cheng Qian had no time to consider why the ghost would have let Han Yuan go just now. He only had one question, what luck had this little beggar got?

Last time he went to the Demon Valley, he encountered the rebellion of monsters; now on his night walk, he even met a demonic cultivator of ghostism!

1. The Chinese version of 'a bad workman always blames his tools.'

2. Niangniang()is a term used to address an imperial concubine. This would be a nickname used by Cheng Qian to call Yan Zhengming.

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Volume I Chapter 26

In this urgent moment, there seemed to be a complete copy of *Introduction to Charms* in Cheng Qian's mind. He quickly browsed through it from the first page to the last one. Suddenly, a small charm popped into his mind—the last chapter had mentioned that charms carved on leaves required much less energy than ones carved on wood, but most of them could only be used once

And it had presented two examples. One was for illumination and the other... what was the use of the other one?

Cheng Qian bit his own tongue fiercely. Then he remembered that he didn't finish reading the book so he didn't know the use of the second charm yet.

But now he was left no time to care so anymore. Cheng Qian put his hands behind him without looking away from the ghost.

As soon as the burin in his hand touched the leaf, Cheng Qian realized that he was in over his head. Even though it was just a leaf, to him, it was as good as a baby, who hadn't learned to walk, being forced to run.

Don't break... don't stop... please...

Cheng Qian's face whitened at a noticeable pace. He felt his energy being sponged up by the burin and became as pale as a mummy. The leaf was killing him. But this was the only chance for him and Han Yuan.

Perhaps the crisis had inspired his potential; Cheng Qian finished his first-ever charm in his life without a hitch. At that instant, a mystical power was passed on to him through the leaf. But he wasn't in the mood to thoroughly examine it.

Cheng Qian swayed and almost fell to the ground. The channels all over his body were aching as though he was stabbed by needles.

Han Yuan caught hold of Cheng Qian's arm. "Xiao-Qian, what's wrong?"

Cheng Qian took two deep breaths and shook Han Yuan off. "Go back and ask master for help."

Han Yuan was stunned. "What?"

Cheng Qian: "Go!"

Suddenly, the male ghost started slowly advancing. Cheng Qian pinched the leaf with his fingers and held it in front of his chest. He demanded, "Stop!"

That leaf gave off a faint light. As this was the first time Cheng Qian carved a complete charm, he didn't know if he did it in the proper way. The charm seemed to be incomplete—only half of it was glittering.

The ghost's eyes fell on the leaf. Temporarily his countenance seemingly brightened a bit, his lifeless eyeballs moved, and his pale and chapped lips moved. Then he said in a barely audible voice, "Heart... Heart-Purifying Charm..."

Cheng Qian's feet gave out and he nearly crumpled.

He shouldn't have taken the chance. How could a rudimentary charm carved on a leaf have any extraordinary effect?

Cheng Qian regretted that he didn't use the illuminating charm; perhaps that would be more useful.

Contemplating the Heart-Purifying Charm, the ghost took another step forward. There was no more room left for Cheng Qian to retreat. He was

forced to take up his wooden sword, his cold sweat soaking his robe. Although his hand was shaking uncontrollably due to fatigue, the tip of the sword was aimed firmly at the ghost.

The ghost gradually went back to consciousness. He stammered, “I... I am not... a bad person, kid...”

It seemed to have been ages since the ghost last spoke. His incoherent words made him sound somewhat miserable; however, Cheng Qian wasn’t a person who’d easily pity others. He wasn’t shaken by the ghost’s words and shouted to Han Yuan behind him, “I said scram! Go find master! Don’t hold me back here!”

Han Yuan was completely lost. Looking at his little senior brother who was trying to be brave, he said, “Xiao-Qian, he said he wasn’t...”

No longer able to contain himself, Cheng Qian exclaimed, “Shut up! You ignorant idiot! He’s a demonic cultivator who practices ghostism!”

The words “demonic cultivator” scared Han Yuan successfully. He was immobilized for a few seconds. His shock stretched across his face before it went pale and then finally exuded undisguised panic and fright. He screamed, turned, and ran away.

Cheng Qian straightened his back with mixed feelings—with Han Yuan here, he was restless; but as he ran off, Cheng Qian’s heart turned cold and hurt as if it had been pierced by an icicle.

But before he could repress these mixed feelings, he heard tottering footfalls from behind. Cheng Qian turned and saw the little beggar running back.

Han Yuan not only ran back but also carried a huge stone with him. He held the stone overhead, making a face as though he was going to throw the

stone on the ghost's head. He stared at the ghost in anger and interrogated him, "You... you're a demonic cultivator?"

Cheng Qian went speechless—how could a stone help? Did you ever hear of any ghost being hit to death by a stone?

"I'm not a demonic cultivator." Right at the moment, the ghost spoke. He said, "I-I'm just a ghost shadow..."

"Ghost shadow" was a soul that was extracted from a person and refined in a Soul-Consuming Lamp. When a ghost shadow was created, it would lose all of their mental abilities and be at the disposal of the demonic cultivator who created them.

"I... I escaped. I'm not a demonic cultivator." The ghost was becoming more and more fluent. He looked at Cheng Qian and politely said, "Little boy, could I have that Heart-Purifying Charm?"

"Bullshit. Ghost shadows are all young girls, are you a young girl?" Cheng Qian sneered.

This ghost just looked like a girl's father!

The ghost's gaze switched from the Heart-Purifying Charm to the wooden sword in Cheng Qian's hand. He went silent for a good while with a blank look on his face, as though he was looking back. After a while, he uttered, "Wooden sword... you're a disciple of Fuyao Sect. No wonder at such a young age you can... you don't know, that the first-class ghost shadows are cultivators' primordial spirits, inferior ones are cultivators' souls, and thirdly non-cultivator young girls' souls. It's just that young girls' souls are the most accessible and the easiest to refine."

"So what are you?" Han Yuan asked.

The ghost looked a little pained. He said softly, “A primordial spirit.”

Finishing that, he saw weariness and disbelief emerging on Cheng Qian’s face. So he bent and picked up the small stone that Han Yuan had tossed at him.

Cheng Qian’s pupils contracted. He knew that ordinary souls couldn’t materialize. If this man could pick up the stone, then he was indeed a primordial spirit.

But... only some powerful veterans had primordial spirits. And according to his observation, Cheng Qian was afraid that even his master didn’t have one.

Cheng Qian froze. In the end, he put away the wooden sword dejectedly. He had resigned to the fact that he stood no chance against a cultivator with a primordial spirit, whether the man’s words were true or not.

“I am Tang Zhen from Mulan Mountain. Speaking of which... I’ve met your master once,” said the ghost, somewhat absent-minded. “A hundred years ago, I fell prey to a demonic cultivator’s plot and my primordial spirit got trapped in his Soul-Consuming Lamp. Fortunately, I was not completely refined. By fluke, I escaped, but I lost my mental abilities during the one hundred years imprisonment and nearly forgot my name... I’m so lucky that you have a Heart-Purifying Charm. Could you please... give it to me?”

Cheng Qian shilly-shallied for a few seconds. Then he put the leaf on the ground and cautiously took a dozen steps backwards grabbing Han Yuan. A trace of delight flashed across the ghost’s face. He reached out his hand and called over the leaf into his grasp. Instantly, the leaf gave off a stronger light than before and transformed into a cluster of white light which was sucked into the ghost’s body. The ghastly, bloody atmosphere and the stink around him disappeared in no time, and a healthy complexion emerged on his face.

The ghost who called himself Tang Zhen took a deep breath and made a deep bow to Cheng Qian and Han Yuan, saying, “Nothing but silent gratitude to your great help, though it isn’t much use, please send my regards to your master. The demonic cultivator Jiang Peng had a relationship with your sect, please tell him to be careful.”

With that, he vanished into thin air as though he had never existed.

“What did he mean?” After a long time, Han Yuan asked baffled, “Xiao-Qian, what did his words mean?”

Cheng Qian didn’t reply. His sight went dark and he slumped onto the ground.

Han Yuan was frightened. He pulled the boy up in a flurry. “Xiao-Qian, what happened?”

Cheng Qian’s ears were ringing and his limbs were so flabby that he couldn’t stand up. So he had to allow Han Yuan to clumsily carry him onto his back.

And the chief culprit was still chattering as he ran carrying Cheng Qian, “Speak to me, Xiao-Qian? Little Senior Brother?”

Cheng Qian was so nauseous that he almost threw up. With fingers clutching at Han Yuan’s clothes, he spat out a sentence using all his strength, “I’m going to tell Master. Han Yuan, you’re dead!”

Volume I Chapter 27

The next day when Cheng Qian woke up, he felt like he had almost perished last night. He opened his eyes only to see Han Yuan by his bedside, looking at him nervously as though he was dying.

Cheng Qian took no notice of him as he crawled out of bed and began to wash and rinse.

Han Yuan just acted like a big Pekinese dog that had caused trouble, following Cheng Qian wherever he went. Finally, Cheng Qian coldly told him: “Scram.”

Han Yuan pocketed his pride and said flatteringly, “Little Senior Brother...”

Cheng Qian looked frosty. “I will not report to Master, alright? Get lost! Or I’ll tell Master right now.”

Han Yuan ran away quickly with his tail between his legs.

Cheng Qian wiped his face dry. He had his own deliberations—from what first senior brother said, Master had already learned from Wen Ya that the so-called Jiang Peng had also arrived here. As a result, he wouldn’t report what happened last night to Master; it might alert him to what they were planning to do. If so, it would be more difficult for them to stalk Master.

Upon walking out of his cottage, Cheng Qian noticed first senior brother expressing his disdain for the food in the inn, then proceeding to ask a Taoist child to prepare better food for him, in Wen Ya Zhenren’s presence.

Han Yuan clearly didn’t learn his lesson from last night’s fearful experience. He jabbered on and on to first senior brother, expressing his wish to hang out.

First senior brother used a bunch of excuses, like he had a stiff neck because of the hard pillow, implying that he didn't feel like moving around.

Yan Zhengming also refused to get on his carriage again because of junior sister's urine.

Cheng Qian felt terrible all over his body and was in a bad mood. So when he saw his clamorous martial brothers, he immediately found a way to relieve his anger as he sneered, "You can have Puddle wash your cushion."

With that, he lifted his finger, and in the direction he pointed, little junior sister Puddle had climbed into first senior brother's carriage again and was stuffing the cushion on which she had peed yesterday into her mouth. Her innocent eyes were blinking, and a big smile was hanging on her face.

And as she hadn't grown a full set of teeth yet, saliva was spilling out of her mouth.

It seemed that Cheng Qian feared that first senior brother wouldn't feel bad, as he gave him another verbal stab. "Look: junior sister has washed your cushion with her drool."

Yan Zhengming looked as though he was going to kill his junior sister and then kill himself.

Anyway, the cottage was definitely not a place to stay, and neither was the carriage. Here was miles away from Fuyao Mountain. Yan Zhengming raised his eyes heavenward, feeling sad that there wasn't even a shelter for him in this vast world.

But soon his master saved him from his sadness.

"There isn't morning class today; you can all go out to have fun in the morning. In the afternoon, we shall set out for the Azure Dragon Island on

the boat.”

Han Yuan cheered for that and looked eagerly at his master, saying, “Master, I heard there’s another fair today.”

“Didn’t I give you a pouch of money yesterday?” Muchun Zhenre said, exasperated. But he was defeated by Han Yuan’s eager expression, so he took a pouch out of his sleeve and exhorted his apprentice like a miser. “Be careful with your money and use it wisely.”

Han Yuan was filled with boundless joy, like a bird flying out of its cage. First senior brother just ignored him. He asked his Taoist children to find a place and put several felt blankets on it so that he could take a nap.

Li Yun had wanted to go with Han Yuan, but after glancing at Cheng Qian, he changed his mind. He said, “I’ll practice swordplay.”

Han Yuan turned to Cheng Qian and obsequiously said, “Little Senior Brother, how about I take you to buy fruit?”

“Take junior sister with you,” replied Cheng Qian ironically. “You two play nice together.”

Han Yuan: “...”

In the end, Han Yuan held Puddle up with one arm. Scratching his cheek, he felt that he seemed to have been mocked. But soon he forgot it because Cheng Qian was like a needle hidden in silk floss that would prick whoever touched him. Sometimes even Master couldn’t be spared. Han Yuan was used to it, so he didn’t mind and joyfully went out with Puddle.

Wen Ya pulled a long face. Watching Muchun Zhenren’s apprentices break up in a hubbub after brief conversations, he gave each of them an

evaluation. Staring at Yan Zhengming, he remarked, “Lack discipline, ne’er-do-well¹.”

Then he looked at Li Yun. “Short of firmness, ne’er-do-well.”

And to Cheng Qian, his evaluation was concise. Without specifying the reason, he stated, “Ne’er-do-well.”

Han Yuan was the last, and the only one who didn’t receive “ne’er-do-well” as his evaluation. Wenya Zhenren asked Muchun Zhenren very surprisedly, “Did you pick up this guy to make up the numbers?”

As for Puddle, she was neglected as she was only half human and didn’t have a full set of teeth.

Finishing his comments, Wen Ya snorted and walked off without looking at Muchun Zhenren’s cloudy face.

At nightfall, the people of Fuyao Sect boarded the ship for Azure Dragon Island.

Cultivators were all built with flesh and blood just like mortals. They were also divided by ranks and liked to compare.

At the port of East Sea, tens of ships and boats were lined up in a row. Some were big ships decorated with carved patterns and exquisite curtains, and some were small boats which were so broken that it seemed that water would come in if they were rocked.

The bargain-hunter Master settled on the small boats at once; it would only cost them five coins per person. That couldn’t be any cheaper and better for them.

There were a few pots and bowls on the boat. It was said that they were used for bailing water when the boat leaked.

But Master's plan fell through this time. Just as he was walking to the boat at the dock, Yan Zhengming had sent a Taoist child to book the largest, most expensive, and most splendid ship. He took the lead to go abroad, head high and chest out.

Cheng Qian went last with his master because he really didn't want to go with any of his martial brothers.

Then Cheng Qian saw his master frown at first senior brother for the first time.

Seeing that, Cheng Qian inquired, "What's wrong, Master? Is it because first senior brother is too prodigal?"

"It's indeed hard to do anything without money," said Muchun. "But money is ultimately an external thing which we can't care too much. He shouldn't have been so ostentatious."

Cheng Qian did a double-take before he realized what his master was talking about. He scanned his surroundings and saw around them were all people heading for Azure Dragon Island. Except for sailors and fishermen, there were also people from other sects.

Some young people who couldn't hide their thoughts were already scrutinizing them up and down.

Yan Zhengming ordered the Taoist children to carry his luxurious stuff onto the ship. His lofty manner had seemingly hidden his identity as a cultivator and made him look somewhat like a profligate son from a wealthy family. He was giving an impression of an unworldly insolent loafer.

Some people thereby showed contempt, some showed repugnance, and several people in rags walking around the boats stared at Yan Zhengming with strange expressions.

Cheng Qian tightened his grip on his wooden sword involuntarily. He suddenly looked up and asked, “Master, when can I have a real sword? A sword like first senior brother’s—I think his swordsmanship isn’t even as good as mine.”

Muchun Zhey looked at him tenderly. “Why do you want a real sword?”

Cheng Qian ran his eyes around those people with unkind expressions again, thinking how he should reply. He was extremely sensitive to hostilities from others and would feel secured only if he was holding a real weapon.

Though Cheng Qian thought first senior brother had got lousy wiring too, Master’s words sounded harsh to him...

Why must a man live under other people’s views and cater to others’ likes?

Why should people disobey their own wills because of the envy of others?

Why?!

But these thoughts couldn’t be said to Master. Cheng Qian was sure that Master wouldn’t like to hear. So he said instead, “I see everyone else has one.”

Muchun Zhenren smiled. “The sword you’re practicing with is different from others’. And real swords might injure you. Just wait until you’re a few years older.”

Cheng Qian: “...”

He felt there was more to Master's words than met the ears.

As the large ship was already booked, Muchun had no choice but to board the vessel with Cheng Qian.

The weather was fine today. Ships were sailing on a calm sea, and the Azure Dragon Island that used to be indistinct could be clearly seen now. Puddle was extremely excited by the smell of the sea. She never calmed down for a second, climbing up and down on Master's shoulders, and messing his hair up like a birds nest.

There were many traveling together with them. From the deck, they could see some sword cultivators fighting each other for practice on the ship beside theirs.

On another ship, several old men were traveling on flying swords, probably to escort juniors of their sect. Perhaps they thought the ship was sailing too slowly, as an old man who looked like a fat radish raised his arms, making his sleeves bulge against the sea wind. There and then, the wind and waves swelled up, and their ship cleaved merrily through the sea as if being pushed by an invisible hand. Several boats nearby were nearly turned over.

Those sword cultivators' ship also came close to capsizing. A middle-aged man who seemed to be a senior ran to the bow of the ship with his heavy saber. He erected the saber beside him and used some unknown force to stabilize the ship, which was neither too small nor too big. His face reddened.

Although Fuyao Sect had nobody to escort them, they had a large ship instead. It just swayed slightly in the huge waves, splashing some seawater.

But hence, Cheng Qian felt more hostile gazes from the small boats around them.

Grabbing his wooden sword, Cheng Qian stood by the railing of the ship expressionlessly. He just felt those cultivators weren't so peaceful, and didn't have a similar laissez-faire attitude² as the people from Fuyao Mountain. Some of them abused their power to bully others, and the ones who were bullied didn't hate those who bullied them but instead envied those who escaped.

Cheng Qian suddenly lost his exhilaration. He didn't want to watch those almighty beings ride the clouds anymore, and his self-pride was at work again; it bothered him that they were traveling side by side with those people.

Getting back in the cabin, Cheng Qian found a place to sit down and took up his burin to do extra practices, with the itchy wish to become an almighty being when he woke up the next day.

Apart from that, he had taken out a swordplay book from the Library. It was called Tide Swordplay, which happened to coincide with their journey on the East Sea. Cheng Qian had finished learning the second form of Fuyao Wooden Swordplay and had just begun learning the third one. He had almost caught up with Li Yun's pace—the reason why he was learning so quickly was that he was the only one of all Muchun's apprentices who got his hands torn from practicing.

Compared with Fuyao Wooden Swordplay, other swordplays seemed to be much more in a straightforward and flat style without those dazzling variations. Just when Cheng Qian got some insight after practicing Tide Swordplay several times, Li Yun broke in.

“Xiao-Qian!” Li Yun pushed the door open, gasping for breath. “Why are you hiding here? Come up with me. It seems that the archdevil first senior brother mentioned is here!”

1. ne'er-do-well: somebody who is lazy and irresponsible

2. the attitude of not interfering, leaving things as they are.

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Cheng Qian and Li Yun scurried to the deck. As soon as Cheng Qian exited the cabin, his nostrils were assaulted by a terrible stench and, as he raised his head, he saw an unusual scene above him—the originally clear sky had been blotted out by dark clouds. They stretched across as far as his eyes could discern, engulfing his vision and shutting out the last ray of sunlight.

All ships on the sea had come to a halt, and all of those seniors who were flying flamboyantly now landed on the ship's deck, their countenance signifying that they had encountered a formidable foe. Some young people may have been oblivious to what was happening, but they were stupefied the moment they all looked up at the sky.

Li Yun fidgeted, pacing back and forth as he quietly asked Cheng Qian, “Is that him? What does he want?”

Cheng Qian suddenly thought of Tang Zhen as he answered, “Probably to collect cultivators' souls; the Celestial Market gathers many cultivators from all around the continent.”

Li Yun turned around, looking at him in horror.

“If he really wanted to capture people, his targets would be those flying seniors and not you. Stop worrying,” Cheng Qian said, looking around. “Where is Master?”

Suddenly, an eagle's cry resounded from afar, followed by weird laughs reverberating in the air. Men and women, old and young: their laughs blended into a creepy harmony, starting off low and quiet before gradually becoming louder and sharper—eventually to the point of resembling hoarse and exhausted cries. It was the epitome of “wailing like ghosts and howling like wolves”.

Li Yun staggered backwards, covering his ears with his hands, “What is this?”

They were surrounded by scenes of chaos. At that moment, Yan Zhengming appeared out of nowhere and seized Cheng Qian by the shoulder, suffocating him with his familiar fragrance of orchids.

“What are you two doing here? Get inside the cabin!” snapped Yan Zhengming.

Cheng Qian looked around for Muchun Zhenren, but he was nowhere to be seen. Panicking, he pulled on Yan Zhengming’s sleeve and asked, “First Senior Brother, where’s Master?”

“I don’t know. I’m searching for him too.” Yan Zhengming’s face looked sullen like deep water. “Don’t be a hindrance here, get inside...”

His voice was soon drowned out by the bloodcurdling laughs. Yan Zhengming closed his mouth and his brows knitted together tightly.

Li Yun was good at avoiding danger and entered the cabin as he was told, but Cheng Qian wasn’t someone who listened to others. Yan Zhengming didn’t have time to argue, so he just violently shoved Cheng Qian into the cabin.

The windproof and shockproof lanterns lit up and Han Yuan was hiding there, anxious and frightened.

Cheng Qian’s heart sank upon seeing Puddle in Han Yuan’s arms.

The tracking charm they made had been tied with a coloured silk around Puddle’s waist by Li Yun. Unfortunately, they had never thought that their master would leave Puddle behind.

Yan Zhengming arrived at last. His face was exhausted and deathly pale. He panted and puffed, leaning against the door with one hand covering his mouth as though trying hard to hold back the vomit.

After a while, he said, "I've identified this stench: it's exactly what a Soul-Consuming Lamp would emit when burning."

Li Yun, who was sat by the window, muttered under his breath, "Shh! Look at the sky."

Looking up, Cheng Qian saw a dense cluster of shadows in the dark sky.

There were tens of thousands of them, all shabbily dressed with blurred faces. They floated about in the air, causing the East Sea to look like the entrance to the Bridge of Helplessness¹.

These ghost shadows... why were there so many?

How powerful was this demonic cultivator, Jiang Peng, exactly?

The dark clouds roiled as the currents surged and fell. Witnessing this scene, those overbearing cultivators suddenly became like gazelles confronted with lions. Cheng Qian could see their cowardice and fright, despite all of them standing in full combat readiness.

A bolt of lightning, accompanied by a peal of thunder, divided the world in two, followed by a billow of black air that streaked across the sky like a dragon diving into the sea. After careful observation, people noticed a man reclining in the dark clouds.

He was wearing a grey robe, with his eyelids hanging low on his ashen and sallow face as though he had an incurable disease. His appearance made him look exactly like a malevolent ghost as he cast his disdainful gaze over all living beings beneath the clouds.

Cheng Qian peeped at Yan Zhengming's hand on the window frame and saw blue veins bulging out.

At first sight of the demonic cultivator, disbelief rushed through Cheng Qian's mind, thinking that there may have been something wrong with first senior brother's ears. Did Master really call such a person "Senior Brother"?

Cheng Qian's imagination failed him; he could hardly believe that such a person was once a member of the Fuyao Sect.

What kind of master could have produced these two apprentices?

Those immortal seniors seemed to cherish their lives more than Cheng Qian could have imagined; nobody even volunteered to stand out against the devil, who emitted a deadly aura. After passing the buck [2](#) to each other, there was finally someone who took up the responsibility to break the impasse.

An old man with a white beard stood out from the crowd. He knocked the deck with his cane, and after contemplating his words, he said very courteously, "We're heading to the Azure Dragon Island for the decennial Celestial Market. What's your intention of stopping us here, fellow Taoist Jiang?"

His politeness was verging on flattery, but the devil didn't seem to buy it.

"The decennial Celestial Market has brought so many talented juniors together. How brilliant..." the phthisic-like Jiang Peng spoke from upon the clouds with a light and gentle voice. Every first and last syllable was connected, causing people to be worried that he would show his fangs in the next second.

Jiang Peng smiled like a gentleman, “I just came along for the ride and to see if there were any emerging talented youngsters whilst I was here. But considering your aptitude, there’s no need to be nervous.”

This was Cheng Qian’s first time seeing a ghost cultivator, and it gave him a completely different impression from what the records in the Library had said. Shock engulfed his heart.

For such a man who was somewhere between a human being and a ghost, even if he had superhuman skills, who would have respect for him?

Who’d care about him? Who’d get along with him? Who’d take him seriously?

Being verbally stabbed, the old man with a white beard felt his face twitch, but he couldn’t gather up the courage to talk back.

Both sides came to a deadlock—as the other party was alone, it would be fairly awkward even to just keep silent on this occasion.

Cheng Qian couldn’t help but put his hand on the hilt of his sword, thinking, “If I had their swords and abilities, I’d have him fuck off right away.”

Although Cheng Qian had this impulse, he was also clear that he didn’t even have the strength to get first senior brother’s hand off his shoulder right now, let alone have a fight with that devil.

Eventually, someone dared to stand up and speak out. A thundering bellow broke the silence, “Get lost, you evil heretic!”

This sentence drew everyone’s attention. Cheng Qian took advantage of this moment as he lurched and threw Yan Zhengming’s grip off his shoulder.

Then he stuck his entire upper body out of the window to find out who the speaker was.

It was a young woman in her twenties or thirties, but her ostensible youth didn't mean anything in a cultivator's case.

She was standing on a small boat which cost five coins per person. Probably being short of money, she was wearing a unisex robe which was, though not shabby, far from new, with many patches around the cuffs. There were a tattered bag and a sword on her back; even the sheath was badly rusted.

She seemed to be careless about her appearance, as she looked dirty and couldn't really count as a beautiful Taoist nun.

Cheng Qian had sharp ears which caught the whispers of those sword cultivator disciples in the distance.

“Who's that? Is she courting death?”

“Sh—that is Tang Wanqiu Zhenren from Mulan Mountain.”

“What? She is Tang Wanqiu? The one who practices ‘lunatic’ swordplay...”

“How come she's also here?”

“Well... a mere... she really overestimates her abilities.”

Cheng Qian accurately caught the words “Mulan Mountain” in the noise.

Her surname was Tang too... what was the relationship between her and the male ghost Tang Zhen?

But before he could think it carefully, those expressionless ghosts in the air had all turned to Tang Wanqiu. Dark clouds ran riot with vicious currents. The boatman of Tang Wanqiu's boat was so scared that he huddled himself up, wishing that he could throw himself into the sea.

Jiang Peng glanced at Tang Wanqiu, thinking nothing of her. He suddenly pursed his lips and a shrill whistle sound pierced into everyone's ears. Cheng Qian felt his ears booming, and there was a moment when he thought he was deafened.

Immediately after that, all ghost shadows gathered into a black dragon, swooping down at the Taoist nun on that broken boat. The boatman gave a miserable shriek and hastily jumped into the water. However, before he reached the sea, a ghost shadow had caught him by the ankle and gave it a deep bite.

When the boatman's leg was almost broken, a shiny sword light swooshed over, chopping the ghost shadow's head off its body.

Despite the rusty sheath of Tang Wanqiu's sword, the sword itself was exceedingly clean and dazzlingly bright. The dusty woman stood alone on the prow of the boat, encircled by thousands of ghost shadows.

However shiny her sword was, it was only intermittently visible in the thick black clouds. Cries and smirks of ghosts mingled with roars of tides. Tang Wanqiu was nearly devoured by the black ghosts, revealing her sorry figure only once in a while.

She was a lonely fighter. Though awkward, she was awe-inspiringly awkward.

It seemed that she didn't give a shit about those who chose to be onlookers for self-preservation. All you could see was steadfastness on her angular face. She herself was the most satirical satire on those cowards.

Cheng Qian was so obsessed that he did not so much as blink. But he soon found something wrong; though Tang Wanqiu's shining sword flashed above and around and appeared to have gained the upper hand, she was nearly on her last legs.

While the demonic cultivator himself was leisurely sitting cross-legged on the clouds throughout as if watching a show. The ghost shadows came in waves and continually assembled in the air, diving toward Tang Wanqiu in a steady stream.

Cheng Qian winced. He had this feeling that Tang Zhenren wasn't a match for that demonic cultivator.

"The evil will not triumph over the virtuous" was just bullshit. There was no denying that the devil had a stronger force. However dauntless the woman was, she ultimately had a body made of flesh and blood.

With a sudden bang, the boat Tang Wanqiu was standing on split in two. Tang Wanqiu held her exclamation back in her throat and managed to jump onto her flying sword, but was pressed down again by another pack of ghost shadows when she tried to fly up. Crises occurred one after another.

Someone exclaimed, but no one helped.

Right at this moment, an arrow abruptly streaked across the blue sky, leaving a trace of an afterimage. The arrow unmercifully shot through the black mist enveloping Tang Zhenren, the tail feather making a piercing sound. Those ghost shadows were cleared immediately before they could dodge, while the arrow swished directly towards the demonic cultivator by virtue of its remaining force. It was so swift and fierce like the first ray of sun that shone through the dark at dawn.

Cheng Qian jerked his head around and saw his master, astounded.

Muchun Zhenren had left the big ship when nobody noticed and was standing on a small broken boat whose boatman and original passengers had fled. He was dripping wet. Clothes clung tightly to his body, leaving his slightly hunched back and skinniness nowhere to hide. He was like an old molting poultry that had curled up, shivering.

Compared to him, even the wretched Tang Wanqiu seemed much more decent.

At once, Cheng Qian knocked Li Yun out of the way and exited the cabin, leaning over the ship's railing. He saw Master holding a bow which was probably left on the boat by a passenger, and there were wood shavings in his thumbnail. It seemed that he had carved some charm on the arrow provisionally.

That striking shot seemed to have burned Muchun up as he looked sort of dispirited. He could barely stand on the rocky boat by propping himself up on the bow, like a wilted leaf shivering in the autumn wind.

That demonic cultivator was reduced to a passive position by Muchun's arrow. He rolled off the cloud and floated in the air, staring stonily at Muchun Zhenren.

Muchun Zhenren opened and shut his mouth, unspeaking. He chuckled after a minute and said, "Jiang Peng."

"Han Muchun," the demonic cultivator cracked an indescribable smile. "Nice to see you again. It's really brave of you to stand out for someone else when you're already half-dead yourself."

Muchun Zhenren gradually straightened his back, which seemed to have been crooked for a million years, and directly met the devil's eyes. With his goatee bristling, he broke into a somewhat uncouth smile with a trace of derision, saying, "You flatter me."

Jiang Peng's face suddenly changed. With a flick of his sleeve, all ghost shadows evaporated in a rush, leaving himself solitary in the sky. Jiang Peng said in a horrifying voice, "An ant trying to shake a giant tree and a waste who already has one foot in the grave. Today I'll take both of you into my lamp and you'll be the stepping-stones on my way of claiming the title of Beiming..."

As he spoke, a mountain of freak waves piled up and the deep water abruptly billowed up as if boiling, following which a water dragon cut through the surface. With a sweep of its tyrannical tail, a lot of people were thrown off their feet.

Muchun Zhenren darted a quick glance backward at Cheng Qian, who was looking at him eagerly, and drew out his wooden sword hanging from his hip. However, just as he decided to launch a death battle against Jiang Peng, his arm was suddenly fettered by some invisible force.

Muchun Zhenren's face finally fell. But just then a comforting voice rang in his ears, "Don't move. I'll take him on."

Before Muchun Zhenren could react, an antiquated copper coin dropped out of his sleeve.

Upon the coin touching the ground, a white smoke rose from it and in a trice, blended into the plentiful water vapor stirred by the water dragon, rising quietly.

The sea was in utter shambles. Looking at the giant water dragon in a stupor, Muchun Zhenren's face changed several times before it stopped at an extremely grave expression.

That water dragon opened its mouth wide, planning to swallow a big ship wholly, when it suddenly felt something and froze in the air. After a second,

it unexpectedly broke down into a mixture of waterdrops and steam and plunged into the sea, whipping up powerful waves.

This event was quite unforeseen. Even Jiang Peng backed and muttered in a frightful tone, “Who?”

When the steam cleared, countless black shadows gathered from all directions, taking a human shape where the water dragon disappeared. But its face was still blurred.

That person grinned in a deep voice and said in a leisure and unhurried manner, “Who’s blustering before me, that he wants to win the title of Beiming?”

1. the place where someone gets reincarnated after death in Taoist myths
2. pass the buck: to evade responsibility by passing it onto somebody else.

Volume I Chapter 29

A sudden hush fell over the sea.

For the four disciples of Fuyao Sect, this dark silhouette was somewhat familiar. Yan Zhengming had caught a few words of what the shadow had said, and though he was the only one who knew how this person who'd once resided within a tablet had now shown up here, all of them were aware of the fact that this man must be closely related to their sect.

The last time they had met in the Demon Valley, this archdevil had treated them very amiably. Though he was fond of fooling those kids, he never angered even when they exposed his lies. From this, one could see his good temper.

Today, however, he appeared to be a starkly different person.

Though Yan Zhengming stood on the deck of a large ship, he felt the tyrannically vicious vibes emitting from Lord Beiming and setting the sea in unrest.

Jiang Peng's expression twisted, and he jumped from the clouds onto the ship carrying a group of sword cultivators.

Those cultivators, who moments ago had been flashing their swords and killing ghost shadows, now leapt into the ocean like dumplings being poured into a pot. Without warning or reason, they splashed into the water and sent up spectacular waves.

A storm sprang up over the sea, causing Yan Zhengming to stagger and nearly lose his footing.

Fortunately, the entire body of this ship had been carved with charms drawn by powerful cultivators, allowing it to stay stable for a good while. It was for this reason that the ship was so expensive. But by the time Yan Zhengming regained his balance, his heart sank. His master disappeared with his boat!

“Tell the shipmaster to drive the ship away,” Yan Zhengming instructed a Taoist boy. “There’s a telescope in my luggage, fetch it for me... Cheng Qian, what the fuck are you doing? Get down!”

Cheng Qian had climbed up the ship last, and while Yan Zhengming had been distracted, Cheng Qian started gazing around the area.

Yan Zhengming rolled up his sleeves, took a striding step with his long legs, and pulled Cheng Qian down by hooking his arms around the boy’s waist.

Cheng Qian had been searching for Muchun Zhenren. After being yanked down like a chick before he had found anything, he struggled for all he was worth. “What are you doing?”

“What are you doing!?” Yan Zhengming shouted in Cheng Qian’s ear, holding him with his hand.

“I’m looking for Master!”

“You’re looking for death!”

Yan Zhengming fumed. Then he got a glimpse of Xueqing hurrying out for Cheng Qian, so Yan Zhengming ordered him, “Ehh... You, what’s your name again? Come over, watch this kid, don’t let him...”

Another quake of the ship cut Yan Zhengming short; Lord Beiming and Jiang Peng had come to blows.

The water dragon breached the surface of the water once again. Even the big ship of the Fuyao Sect couldn't resist leaning sideways. Yan Zhengming had been left no time to hand Cheng Qian over to Xueqing. He pulled Cheng Qian tightly into his arms, and immediately after, he fell over, his back hitting the cabin next to him. The charms all over the entire ship began groaning madly.

With one side being an almighty demonic cultivator who could trap primordial spirits into his Soul-Consuming Lamp, and the other side being the grandmaster of all devil magic—Lord Beiming—their earthshaking clashes made those people on the sea seem like lowly crickets and ants who were forced to flow helplessly with the waves.

Trapped in such a sorry plight, Yan Zhengming finally couldn't help shouting out his thoughts.

“I knew we shouldn't have left the mountain!”

Cheng Qian struggled to lift his head and complained, “You are pressing my ribs.”

Yan Zhengming picked himself up with both hands and feet and thrust Cheng Qian into the cabin. “That's because you're so short that my arm could only reach your ribs!”

All of the protection charms on the big ship worked at full capacity. The ship swayed like a flickering candlelight in the midst of the raging tides. Perhaps after this experience, their master would no longer oppose young master Yan's theory that “cheap things are not good; good things are not cheap.”

Only then did Yan Zhengming take a breath and look over the situation.

Yet the water vapour had blurred his eyesight, so he couldn't see anything. He involuntarily thought of what he had heard from Wen Ya. According to him, Lord Beiming should be a senior of their sect who was still concerned about the sect despite the fact that he had strayed into Diabolism. Last time, he even sacrificed one of his souls in the Demon Valley to save them.

At that thought, Yan Zhengming suddenly became a little worried: this black shadow in front of them was probably an incomplete primordial spirit since he had only two out of three spiritual souls left. This ghost cultivator, on the other hand, happened to be the primordial spirit-killer and also didn't look like someone to be trifled with. So, what if he even defeated Lord Beiming?

But this thought only lingered in his head for a second or so before it vanished. "This is a fight between two devils; whichever side wins has nothing to do with us," Yan Zhengming thought, and as he adjusted his facial expression, he prepared to turn to give Cheng Qian a lecture. Nonetheless, he turned around only to find that when his concentration had lapsed for just a moment, Cheng Qian had gone missing!

And Puddle, as well.

Their disappearance made Yan Zhengming choke with anger, worry churning in his stomach. He looked around in a great flurry, fearing that those two brats had been captured by ghost shadows, or that they had fallen into the sea in the confusion.

"Young Master, third martial uncle is there!"

Yan Zhengming stumbled over to the Taoist child, and in the direction the Taoist boy was pointing to, he saw Cheng Qian and Puddle stealthily landing on their master's broken boat.

Puddle's wings hadn't shrunk into her back yet, so it was evident how they had gotten down there. Yan Zhengming only couldn't puzzle out how Cheng Qian had managed to persuade her.

In the meantime, the two devils fought heatedly in the sky. In such a tense situation, Yan Zhengming couldn't just go rant at his junior brother; instead, he could only glare at him. Seeing that bastard wave to him from that leaking boat, Yan Zhengming felt a spasm of pain in his stomach.

He found this "gentle and quiet" junior brother had such a brave bearing that he could even disregard his life and death. That boy didn't give a shit about whether the sky fell or the earth quaked, and cared about only a few people. Therefore, even if the two devils were going to rip a hole in the heavens, all he wanted to do was to find his master.

Muchun Zhenren was so scared by his apprentices' arrival that his heart nearly jumped out of his mouth. He hurriedly put his index and middle fingers together, shot a bullet of spirit energy at Puddle and Cheng Qian to get them down, and raised his arms to catch them.

He was just about to lose temper when Cheng Qian clutched at his sleeves. The first sentence out of his mouth was, "Master, are you alright!?"

"Ah ah!" Puddle echoed with him.

Muchun Zhenren's eyelids kept twitching. On one hand, he wanted to give each of them a slap in the bottom; on the other hand, his heart was so moved and softened by Cheng Qian's words that in the end, he failed to do what he wanted to do.

Just then, a shriek broke out overhead. Jiang Peng's body was nearly transparent, a gruesome flame dimly visible in his chest. Currents of air as dark as ink rose up in waves to his face, darkening even the whites of his eyes.

Dumbstruck, Muchun Zhenren murmured, “Using his body as the lamp... is he freaking crazy?”

And then, Muchun Zhenren’s presence changed as he planted his wooden sword into the deck. The sword in his hand seemed to have transformed into an exceptionally sharp weapon as it effortlessly cleaved deep into the deck. At the same moment, seawater rushed all around them, rising and forming a globe of water which encased the master and his apprentices inside its sphere.

Shortly after he’d done that, an inexpressible scream whipped out, so earsplitting that even Muchun Zhenren’s water globe couldn’t completely block it, and so mournful that it seemed as though thousands of ghosts were wailing at the same time. An ominous air climbed into the sky and gathered those dark clouds together. Lightning loomed over the clouds as the canopy of the sky shrouded the world in darkness, dwarfing Lord Beiming in insignificance.

As the ghost shadows rampaged, Lord Beiming’s figure became increasingly fragile. Beneath his feet were treacherous surging tides, where we stood looking like the most indomitable thorn between the heaven and earth.

Watching that figure, a phrase dawned upon Cheng Qian—“No matter how many foes, they cannot bend my will.”

The powerful demonic cultivator who could refine primordial spirits and the down-and-out ugly Taoist bun, the wild water dragon and the unsharp wooden sword, the thunders from the highest heavens and the fragmented soul of Lord Beiming...

Tang Wanqiu’s dazzling swordlight, the sawdust in master’s fingertips, and the solitary view of Lord Beiming’s back... suddenly, all those scenes flashed across Cheng Qian’s mind as something flew into his body, racing

through his aching and still-recovering channels, sending a buzz of pain through his body.

Startled, Muchun Zhenren, hurried to catch Cheng Qian as he fell. He hadn't expected that this boy would drift into his first meditation under such a situation and was unsure about whether this apprentice was innately brave or if he was destined to embark on a dangerous branch road in the future.

The situation was critical for Cheng Qian. Each time, the Celestial Market was held on an island on the East Sea. On that island was a forest of celestial mountains which made this area thick with magic. Now, that abundant spiritual energy was excessively absorbed into Cheng Qian's body like an ocean being emptied into a small brook, almost bursting Cheng Qian's fragile channels.

Puddle was scared voiceless. She blankly observed her third senior brother curl up because of the billows of pain.

In the sky, Jiang Peng had fully changed into a huge Soul-Consuming Lamp. The ghost shadows as multitudinous as willow catkins were sucked into the inauspicious lamp flame in an instant, and even the black mist covering Lord Beiming's skin nearly dispersed. But before anyone could get a clear view of his face, Lord Beiming dashed towards the lamp with remarkable speed, like a moth darting into the fire.

Unexpectedly, however, the moment Lord Beiming moved, Puddle suddenly lost control of her wings and levitated in the air as if being pulled up.

In a dreadful rush, Muchun Zhenren stretched out to grip Puddle's clothes while watching over Cheng Qian at the same time.

Only then did he notice the belt on the chubby girl's waist. He reached to the gaudy belt and pulled it off.

Muchun shook a wooden talisman out of it. It was exactly the “tracking charm” that Cheng Qian had instructed Yan Zhengming to make.

Cheng Qian himself was a just beginner who lacked all understanding of the taboos and knacks of the art of charms, and Yan Zhengming was nothing short of an amateur; on top of that, they frequently quarreled while making the talisman, so how could they have possibly carved the tracking charm in the correct way?

Actually, even Muchun Zhenren didn’t recognize what that charm was when he passed a simple glance over it.

It wouldn’t matter if the charm were completely incorrect; at most, it would just be a waste of wood. The dangerous thing about it was that this unknown charm seemed to have now activated!

Right at the moment when Lord Beiming and the Soul-Consuming Lamp crashed in the sky, the vast darkness battling the intense brightness, a sparkle burst out from the talisman and quickly stretched out and expanded, turning into dazzling light. That light then rose up and crashed into a bolt of lightning that fell from the heavens. For a moment, everyone was struck blind, and the world before them became a world of white.

After an unknown amount of time, the blaze faded out. Lord Beiming and Jiang Peng were both gone, and Muchun Zhenren and his two apprentices had also disappeared. Where they once stood, only shreds of colored silk were left.

Cheng Qian suffered the anguish of thousands of cuts before he felt the pain finally ease away. He thought he was dying. In his unconsciousness, he seemed to hear a light cry. That was... junior sister?

Then he heard another soft voice whispering, “Shh—don’t cry.”

As Puddle's whimper died down, everything around Cheng Qian seemed to be moving away from him. He started to lose sense of his limbs and soon his existence. He felt as if he was sinking into an unknown place and blending into it.

After an unknown period of time, Cheng Qian came round and felt better than he ever had before. Even the weariness and internal injuries from the past few days had now disappeared.

He slowly exhaled a breath and blinked. Then he found himself in an unfamiliar place.

This seemed to be a valley where an incredibly huge tree stood. Its root protruding from the ground was as high as a house, and beneath it lay a skeleton.

Beside the skeleton was his junior sister, along with a strange man.

Boggled, Cheng Qian propped himself up. "Senior... who are you?"

Then it suddenly struck him that he knew this guy—he was the man on the half piece of portrait Cheng Qian had discovered on the second-to-last floor of the Library. In front of this man's feet lay silently a weasel with a slender body, though one couldn't tell if it was alive.

Puddle stared at this stranger inquisitively. Although her human part didn't recognize him, her demon part found this person very familiar.

The "stranger" turned to Cheng Qian, smiling faintly. "After a bit of time has passed, you can't even recognize your own master?"

Cheng Qian's legs were originally numb; after hearing the familiar voice of this stranger, he immediately slumped back to the ground. "Master?"

How come his long-waisted and short-legged master became such a handsome man!?

Being taught the word “master” heaps of times, Puddle understood what it meant. She let out a surprised “oh” and tilted her head, looking seriously in thought as a string of glistening dribble hung from her mouth.

Seeing her saliva, the man in a long robe with wide sleeves sighed and carefully wiped the saliva off. Then he droned, complaining, “Only I, your master, would not detest you, my dirty girl. If it were your first senior brother here, he would have stewed you.”

This familiar manner of speaking restored a sense of kinship in Puddle. She soon forgot about what master looked like before his face “changed” and happily blew her nose, smearing her master’s clean robe with tears and snot.

Cheng Qian was so confused that he felt like he was dreaming. There were so many questions on his mind, but he could only start from the urgent ones. “Master, what is this place? And... how did you become like this?”

Muchun Zhenren took out the slab, which had broken into two halves, and threw them at Cheng Qian, saying sulkily, “You have the cheek to ask me that? Look at what you guys have carved!”

Cheng Qian instantly recognised that was the thing which they’d worked on for a half night. He stammered, “This... this is a tracking charm.”

Muchun Zhenren sighed, “How dare dabblers like you touch charms which you’ve never seen before? You really have guts... there is more than one mistake in your strokes, making it only a semi-finished soul-tracking charm. Originally it had no use, but the soul-consuming lamp and Lord Beiming’s powerful primordial spirit forced it to activate, and now it has followed Lord Beiming’s primordial spirit to his boneyard.”

Cheng Qian couldn't help but rest his eyes on the skeleton under the tree.

That was Lord Beiming's?

He'd been dead?

A lot of doubts hovered in Cheng Qian's head. He tentatively inquired, "Master, do you know him?"

Muchun Zhenren gave a wry smile. "Thanks to you guys, I recognised him only just now."

With that, he fished a copper coin out of his sleeve and said, "Brother Wen Ya has given me three copper coins¹; now I have only this one left."

His fingertips were dazzlingly white in contrast to the rusty coin. Cheng Qian found himself still more used to Master's wretched appearance with a moustache—this man looked like someone who had walked out from a picture, and thus gave Cheng Qian a feeling of distance as though in the next moment, he would return into the portrait.

Muchun Zhenren flicked his fingertip against that coin, and with a tinkling sound, a cloud of fog rose up from the copper coin, forming into Lord Beiming.

After scrutinizing the man for a moment, Muchun Zhenren slowly knelt down while holding Puddle, saluting, "Master."

1. you may not notice, but the three copper coins were first mentioned in Chapter 5.

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Volume I Chapter 30

Cheng Qian was transfixed by his master's form of address. He wasn't sure at first if he should call the other side "martial grandfather".

Just a year ago, when Cheng Qian first walked into Fuyao Mountain, he had blindly thought that this was an illegitimate yet somewhat decent sect.

It was completely understandable of him to think that way; after all, apart from the knight-errants, which folk stories didn't describe sects deserving to be called such as having great bunch of people fighting and scheming against each other?

Whereas Fuyao Sect only had a sect leader with a handful of callow kids—even gangs of youths in rural areas were perhaps much larger than this.

But in the last couple of days, Cheng Qian had found out one after the other that he had not only a martial uncle, but also a martial grandfather. Though that wasn't something he'd be proud of at all.

Just taking a look at his martial uncle who had the power to perform astounding feats, and his martial grandfather, the top demonic cultivator in this land, and then taking another look at his pitiful master, Cheng Qian couldn't help but wonder if Fuyao Sect existed just to elucidate to the world the meaning of "While the priest climbs a post, the devil climbs ten."

And moreover, between "a poultry sect"[1](#) and "the headquarters of demonic cultivators", Cheng Qian dithered over which suited Fuyao Sect better.

After being recognized, Lord Beiming sighed a bit. Then the black mist around his body cleared up to reveal his true face.

He had neither the demeanour of a transcendent being nor the fierce features of an ogre. He was, on the whole, an ordinary person.

His sunken eyes added a touch of handsomeness to his visage. But beyond that, this legendary grandmaster of all devil magic was actually an unimposing middle-aged man—a haggard man with a sallow face and fine shades of grey at his temples.

Tucking his hands into sleeves, Lord Beiming stood near his lonely corpse. Then he waved his hand and said, “Rise, Xiao-Chun—you never knelt to me when I was alive, so why bother doing it now?”

Muchun Zhenren readily stood up as he was told and laid Puddle down, letting her go to Cheng Qian. Then he said in a rather casual manner, “I’m visiting a grave, anyway; of course, I’m supposed to kneel to my ancestor.”

Cheng Qian: “...”

He found it was a tradition of Fuyao Sect to show very little respect to one’s elders and masters.

“I thought you were dead and that your primordial spirit had reincarnated. That was why I had even mistaken Xiao-Qian as your reincarnation, since his [bazi](#)2 was the same as yours, and that mulish disposition of his was so like you. But I’d never thought... that your souls lingered in this world by attaching to three copper coins.” Muchun Zhenren briefly paused before he carried on with a sense of grievance, “Master, since you had to attach to something, why did you choose copper coins? Even if you couldn’t find gold, silver ingots also work great!”

When Lord Beiming was shrouded in black mist, his aura as the grandmaster of all devil magics oozed from every pore, making people readily prostrate themselves in worship. Whereas when he unveiled himself, it wasn’t like that at all.

“If I did so, would I ever have had the chance to see you again? You’d have squandered them to meet your urgent needs.” Lord Beiming chuckled as he regarded Muchun Zhenren with the same gloom Muchun had while talking to Yan Zhengming.

“Master, times have changed. Our sect is no longer as poor as it once was.”

“I know. You’ve accepted a God of Wealth as your apprentice,” said Lord Beiming ironically, without any change of expression.

After this brief conversation, the master and the apprentice stared at each other for a moment before breaking into a sudden laughter which baffled Cheng Qian.

Holding Puddle, Cheng Qian gazed at the hollow-eyed corpse, utterly unclear about what the two seniors were laughing about.

Moments later, Muchun Zhenren stopped laughing and asked, “One of your souls dispersed in the Demon Valley, and one burnt up in the Soul-Consuming Lamp, so this is your last one? Having lingered in the world for so long with nothing to rely on, even Lord Beiming will end up being eradicated, right?”

“It’s just death, nothing serious.” Lord Beiming smiled again.

“How about senior brother; is he dead now?”

When in front of dozens of ships and under countless gazes, Muchun had to call him “Jiang Peng” directly. But now facing Lord Beiming, there was nothing to conceal, so he used “senior brother”.

Lord Beiming paused and answered with eyes half closed, “He didn’t die in seriousness. I splintered the spirit flame with all the strength of my remaining soul, and I’ve given him a heavy blow. But your senior brother

has refined his body and the Soul-Consuming Lamp together; his souls have become the spirit of that lamp and can never enter the cycle of reincarnation again. He won't be counted as a human being anymore, so arguably he's dead."

Muchun Zhenren went silent for a while before asking again, "Did he recognize you?"

Lord Beiming just kept smiling without replying. His smiling silence was as though saying, "Now that things have reached this point, does it make any difference whether he recognized me or not?"

Then he turned to Cheng Qian, benevolently saying, "Kid, it's my third time to see you. Come here."

Cheng Qian advanced, but he didn't go near Lord Beiming as he was told. Rather, he silently went up to Muchun Zhenren's side and tepidly gave a wordless salute to Lord Beiming, as Cheng Qian didn't know how to address him.

Even though Master and Lord Beiming seemed to be very close when they chatted, Cheng Qian's intuition told him that it might not necessarily be the case.

Suppose that they had been so intimate as they appeared now, Cheng Qian couldn't fathom why Master had never mentioned martial grandfather at least once in the past few years, and why he didn't come to bury him.

Lord Beiming lowered his head and asked patiently, "You're such a daring little blighter as to enter meditation in that situation. Did you have an insight?"

Cheng Qian dithered before he replied politely, "Enlightened by senior, you, and Tang Zhenren, I learned the bearing of being fearless of the Heaven, the

Earth, the people, and anything.”

His answer aroused many feelings in Lord Beiming’s heart. He scrutinized Cheng Qian for a minute before saying in a mild tone, “Good boy. Eventually, the broken ‘bloodline’ of our Fuyao Sect is linked up again.”

Cheng Qian was terrified at what he said.

In a split second, Master’s changed appearance, the seemingly dead weasel, and Jiang Peng’s words about Master being half-dead... all those ins and outs flashed across Cheng Qian’s mind and pieced together a fact, a brutal fact. Cheng Qian understood the overtones of Lord Beiming’s meaningful words almost in a twinkling of an eye.

He jerked his head around, staring in disbelief at his master who suddenly became such a handsome man.

Muchun Zhenren put his hand upon Cheng Qian’s head, sighing, “If only you can share some of your cleverness with your fourth junior brother—yes, Xiao-Qian, your guess is right. The ‘bloodline’ of Fuyao Sect has broken off since many years ago. And I’m a dead person.”

Cheng Qian clenched his teeth so hard that he released grinding sounds but failed to say any word.

Muchun Zhenren paid no attention to that. He resumed with composure, “The sect leader at that time—namely, my master—was at the critical moment of his closed-door cultivation and had no time to handle other affairs. During that period, his first apprentice, Jiang Peng, degenerated into the devil way of ghostism and fled. I went trailing after him, but I overestimated my abilities and became the first victim of his Soul-Consuming Lamp. Fortunately, however, his ghost cultivation was still immature back then, and a fragment of my primordial spirit wasn’t completely refined. So, I escaped and fell into the body of a weasel spirit

who was dying because it had failed to overcome the Heavenly Tribulations of lightning. And thus, I've had the opportunity to inherit and pass on the Sect Leader's Seal."

Lord Beiming's look held some sorrow. "You..."

Muchun Zhenren laughed. "I was coping fine with the weasel spirit's body. The only problem was that he was too greedy."

"Aren't you afraid that your primordial spirit might disperse from exhaustion, and that you will never enter the cycle of reincarnation if you possess a corpse as your body?" said Lord Beiming softly.

Muchun Zhenren gently shook his sleeves and took a sweeping look at his feet. Then, smiling, he said in an indifferent air in imitation of Lord Beiming, "Nothing serious."

"Master, who split the portrait in the Library?" asked Cheng Qian quietly.

Muchun Zhenren was taken aback. "Didn't I clean it up? Oof... it was probably me. My primordial spirit had undergone the tortures of the bites of ghosts in the Soul-Consuming Lamp, so I couldn't help breeding grudges after I escaped. In addition, the weasel spirit was a dead corpse; I hadn't gotten used to its body in the beginning. So there was a time when I was in a state of delirium."

He narrated those events which, if one studied them closely, were obviously massively understated. But Cheng Qian just felt something choking his chest. He threw his arms around Muchun Zhenren's waist and buried his head deep in Muchun's bosom.

So warm... how come it was only a fragment of his primordial spirit?

Muchun continued, “I couldn’t even walk on legs when I first possessed the weasel’s body. So I rolled and crawled, trying to get back and find Master. However...”

Lord Beiming stood rooted to the ground, forming into a lonely shadow against the light.

“I saw the Four Saints besieging Fuyao Mountain,” Muchun Zhenren said to Cheng Qian. “Only then did I know that my master was in fact a once-in-a-blue-moon devil. The Four Saints were the mightiest men at that time. The battlefield stretched all the way from the Fuyao Mountain to the Worriless Valley two hundred Li away—that’s where we are standing right now—and their battle incurred the Heavenly Tribulation, which turned the valley into a sea of fire. For the following three years, the earth was naked of grass and empty of life. One of the Four Saints died and the others sustained severe injuries. I guess if they didn’t pick the time when Master was still in his seclusion, someone else might have died under that ancient tree.”

Then he turned to Lord Beiming. “I didn’t know that you were already a Beiming. Please forgive me for my ignorance, Master.”

Muchun Zhenren was deliberately careful with his narration. For some reason, he didn’t mention any of the key points—like how did Jiang Peng turn to an evil way? Why would he kill Muchun? How had Lord Beiming embarked on this path? Who were these Four Saints? And what caused their murder of Lord Beiming?

From start to finish, Muchun only said the course without any mention of the causes.

In normal times, Cheng Qian would definitely interrogate his master on his doubts. But now, he just couldn’t be bothered with that at all. He even failed

to breathe smoothly as though his chest was clogged up with cotton, making him want to heave a big sob.

But Muchun Zhenren disengaged himself from Cheng Qian's embrace, gently but firmly as well. He bent and picked up a branch which transformed into a wooden sword in his hand. Then he advanced to a clearing, saying to Cheng Qian, "You've finished learning the second form; now I'm going to show you the remaining three forms. Watch carefully."

Cheng Qian had always nagged Muchun Zhenren to teach him swordplay, yet invariably ended up being sent away with a pouch of candies. But now, when Master finally offered to teach him, he didn't feel excited about that in the slightest.

He knew that Master was going to leave.

Cheng Qian stood dazed for a while. Out of the blue, tears burst out of his eyes like floods rushing out of a dam. He held his breath and bit his lip hard, trying in vain to stop the tears. Never had Cheng Qian cried like this. Even when he was sold by his parents, he didn't shed a single tear. However, now he was crying as if there was no tomorrow.

For the first time in his life, Cheng Qian experienced this penetrating and incurable pain which he was incapable of sustaining and enduring. It smouldered in his heart, as well as over the dignity he'd tried to keep all the time.

Puddle pulled Cheng Qian's hem cautiously but was snubbed. So she started blubbering as well.

Lord Beiming seemed to be amused. He asked, "Boy, weren't you fearless of the Heaven, the Earth, and the people? Why are you snivelling now?"

Cheng Qian endeavored desperately to hold back his cry. But he found that though he could hold back his happiness and sadness, he couldn't hold back his tears. He cried and wiped his eyes, his vision keeping alternating between being blurry and clear.

“Master, I’m not learning and you don’t teach me that, okay? You... you don’t want us anymore?” Cheng Qian said in a voice strangled with sobs.

Muchun hung down his wooden sword a bit. He wanted to placate Cheng Qian, but then he remembered that Cheng Qian wasn’t Han Yuan; he wouldn’t be easily coaxed. After a long pause, he said, “It’s all the karma; it’s my fate. Even if the today’s accident didn’t happen, I didn’t have many years left. I can’t take care of you for a lifetime anyway.”

Muchun Zhenren stopped at this point. He knew this kid would split hairs whatever he said, so he locked himself up in silence.

He swung the wooden sword horizontally in front of his chest and made a neat opening move. This time, he didn’t read the absurd mnemonic rhyme, nor did he intentionally slow his moves down.

The first form, the roc’s long flight³. The mettled youths, their ideals held high, would reach the moon in the sky.

The second form, seek and pursue. Endless progress and pain lay in the firm, masculine sword moves.

The third form, backfire. Though one gets everything he pursues, he remains an ant on this vast land; whatever seems solid will eventually be destroyed like the sand castle being destroyed by waves.

The fourth form, decline from prosperity. After ups and downs, still, no one could run away from this fate.

The fifth form, return to trueness...

Cheng Qian couldn't help thinking back on the words master had told him —“ ‘death’ and ‘ascending to the Heaven’, is there any difference between them?”

They were both people coming and going, nothing different at all.

Tears hadn't dried on Cheng Qian's face when Muchun Zhenren finished practicing the full set of Fuyao Wooden Swordplay.

“Are you quite sure of that?” asked Muchun Zhenren in a tender tone.

Cheng Qian compressed his lips and exclaimed obstinately, “No!”

“Liar! I won't show you again anyway.” Muchun Zhenren reached out his hand and flicked Cheng Qian's forehead. Presently his smile faded. Regarding Cheng Qian, he said, “Xiao-Qian, do you remember the sect rules? What does it say about dealing with sect members who brought shame to our sect?”

Cheng Qian glanced at Lord Beiming with his bloodshot eyes, making no response.

Muchun Zhenren said softly, “Those who committed unforgivable sins shall be disposed of by their fellow disciples—that's the reason why, even though we have many betrayers since the foundation of our sect, we still have a proper standing among other sects.”

Cheng Qian rubbed away his tears.

“Taoism tells us to let nature take its course, and that a cultivator should stay true to his mission. Now that he has brought disaster, there is sure

punishment for him, as the Heaven always repays a crime,” said Muchun Zhenren tranquilly.

Suddenly, the sleeves of his robe floated without wind. His face went ghastly pale and there seemed to be a sparkle flashing across his eyebrows.

“I was in the helm of Fuyao Sect for eighty years, but I am truly guilty for our ancestors and for you and your senior brother. Thus, I vowed to use my three spiritual souls to protect our sect from three catastrophes. After that, I will simply be flying ashes. So Xiao-Chun, you needn’t do that yourself,” said Lord Beiming with equanimity on his face.

Hearing that, Muchun Zhenren didn’t telegraph gratitude. In effect, he didn’t generate any particular feeling. He only answered stoically, “Master, if I let you die a natural death, how would that do justice to those grieving souls killed by you?”

His voice was smooth and overflowed with mildness as always. In Cheng Qian’s mind, however, these were the iciest words that ever met his ears.

It was as though Muchun Zhenren had immersed all his emotions in cold water, with not a hint of joy or pain emitting on the surface.

A line of very complicated charms swiftly flashed through the air, glistening. That was what Li Yun had lauded to the skies: the miraculous invisible charm.

Lord Beiming didn’t dodge or try to escape. He stood still in place, looking with crinkled eyes at the transitory charm which soon integrated into the natural world, saying, “To seal a soul with a soul.”

“My life is well worth it if I could seal one soul of Lord Beiming,” said Muchun Zhenren smilingly.

Cheng Qian opened his eyes wide, and in the next second, he was shoved off by a strong force. He reeled, and over he went, slipping into a coma for a sliver of time.

By the time he opened his eyes again, Lord Beiming had gone. Cheng Qian saw a thin wisp of black mist being twined by a watery golden light. In the end, they disappeared into the rusty copper coin in Muchun Zhenren's hand.

Only, the hand that was holding the copper coin—Muchun Zhenren's entire body was becoming transparent. He knelt and buried the coin by the skeleton under the ancient tree before he beckoned Cheng Qian with a smile.

Muchun Zhenren: "There was a seal on that weasel's body. Go take it off."

Cheng Qian seemed to be firmly resolved to act against Muchun, as he remained motionless.

Muchun Zhenren's smile gradually faded. He raised his hand, wanting to stroke Cheng Qian's head, only to find that it went directly through.

He said, "That is the seal of the sect leader of Fuyao Sect. Remember to give it to your first senior brother when you get back and ask him to take care of you guys in future. As for the swordplay, you really should work harder on the second form."

Finishing that, he gave Cheng Qian a look with deep emotion before moving his lips. He said almost inaudibly, "I'm leaving. Farewell."

No sooner had he finished speaking than his figure completely vanished like a handful of broken light running into the dirt and disappearing.

The legend has it that "in former days there was a large tree called Chun which had a spring and autumn each of eight hundred years." So people use

“live as long as the Chun” to wish their parents a long life. However, human beings, after all, were neither grass nor trees.

Muchun Zhenren buried that copper coin in the dirt, by which it seemed that he’d sent Cheng Qian to a new start—every generation begins their seeking and pursuing from the moment when they buried the last generation into earth with their own hands.

1. a poultry sect: an unauthorized sect.
2. bazi: a Chinese astrological system to tell an individual’s fortune. See more [here](#).
3. used to describe someone who has a bright future.

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The light gradually broke through the clouds and cleared away the fog in the valley.

Cheng Qian didn't know how long he'd remained on his knees, nor did he know how he should pick himself up or even where he should go.

Inside his brain were flashbacks of his master sheltering him from the rain, his head-wagging chant, and the Fuyao Wooden Swordplay. Those sword moves just kept repeating in his head, whether he wanted to watch or not.

And in the end, all that was left was the numbness and helplessness which came from the loss of a loved one.

Cheng Qian was like a little bird that had come back from its first attempt at flying and joyfully wanted to be praised, only to find that the nest was gone. From this day on, he would never receive that praise he had yearned for, even if, someday, he became an exceptional master of his abilities.

Cheng Qian did not want to admit his fright. It was only loneliness, he thought.

It was not until this moment that Cheng Qian felt deep in his core that he needed an enemy, something that, for the next decade, the decades after that, or even for the rest of his life, would give him some kind of clear and strong direction, and let him draw from this hatred an inexhaustible strength that would anchor him, unswervingly, to his course.

Sadly, he didn't have one.

His master had seen through him. He'd anticipated what Cheng Qian would instinctually do in a time of helplessness, so he didn't give Cheng Qian any

chance.

Not a single word had slipped his mouth regarding the entanglements between him, Jiang Peng, the nameless Lord Beiming, and the Four Saints. He'd buried all those stories in the earth along with that copper coin, leaving not even a seed of hatred for Cheng Qian, thus forcing him to throw away everything he could possibly rely on to pick himself up after crying.

At the same time, however, Muchun Zhenren did leave a little tail to him—his junior sister who was howling until she was out of breath.

With Puddle's current intelligence, she couldn't quite comprehend what had just happened. She was famished, so she looked around for her master but couldn't find him. There was only her senior brother who didn't pay attention to her at all.

Though she might be a sturdy child without a demanding temper, she could no longer hold back her hunger, and so she cried. But she soon discovered that her cry didn't work; therefore, she switched to gnawing on the wooden sword created by her master.

When Cheng Qian finally thought of his junior sister, she had dug several pits in the wooden sword using her only five milk teeth.

They were truly milk teeth worthy of the Heavenly Monster!

Cheng Qian teetered, and he picked himself up by pressing on his knees. Then he forced apart Puddle's mouth with his hands. "Spit it out!"

"Ah ah!" Puddle spat out two chips of wood at him.

After that, she was carried to a riverside by her senior brother and was forced to rinse her mouth. It was Puddle's first time seeing her third senior brother's exasperated side. Then she threw a tantrum.

Cheng Qian shot a fierce glance at her. “Stop crying.”

“Ah ah ah!” Puddle screamed in protest.

Cheng Qian just passively let her cry and stared at her with a steady gaze.

Puddle cried for a while by his side. Then she found that there was no use in crying like that at all. She didn’t know where Master had gone. Since it was just the two of them, she didn’t even have anyone to whom she could tattle on her senior brother. Therefore, she ceased to sob and sat there silently, hoping that her third senior brother’s conscience would have him find some food for her.

Even a fatty worm would also do!

Cheng Qian rescued the wooden sword whose edge had been bitten from Puddle’s teeth and washed it clean in the water. He was not in the mood to coax the child to not cry, so he just placed her by the river and warned her seriously, “Sit still, don’t move.”

With that, he rolled his trousers up to his knees and fumbled to catch fish.

Puddle had one merit, and that was that she knew how to act when it came to her own benefit. She quickly saw the prospect of a meal from Cheng Qian’s actions, so she sat quietly by the riverside like a well-trained dog.

However, fish were not so easy to catch. Cheng Qian had never played around when he was at home, let alone after he had gone to Fuyao Sect. So he was truly bad at such activities. Every time those scaly creatures slipped away from his hands, and would occasionally whip their tails, leaving a few lacerations on Cheng Qian’s hands.

The day was getting dark. Eventually, Puddle couldn’t wait anymore. She curled up and fell asleep with a finger in her mouth, feeling thirsty and

hungry.

Standing barefoot in the cold water, Cheng Qian took a look at her. He straightened up his sore back and licked the wounds on his hands.

Master had said that one day he'd be able to soar up to the sky and dive into the sea. But the cruel fact was that he couldn't even catch a fish.

He didn't know what plants in the Worriless Valley were poisonous, so he dared not to pick the fruits and leaves. He didn't have the courage to provoke those beasts either, as he didn't have a weapon with him and didn't want to become their dinner.

He'd always held others in contempt, feeling that he'd surely be a powerful cultivator in the future. But now he had gotten stuck while simply trying to get himself some food.

Gradually, the day had fallen completely dark. The surroundings were alarmingly quiet. From far away in the forest came the roars of beasts. Cheng Qian listened for a while and suddenly frowned. He scurried to the shore, held up the sleeping Puddle, and clenched his wooden sword, wondering where he should go to be safe in the night.

In the blink of an eye, the roars of the beasts had gotten closer. This wave after wave of roars made Cheng Qian feel he was under fire from all quarters, making him tense up from head to toe.

Cheng Qian didn't dare to hesitate anymore. He carried Puddle and ran upstream. But unfortunately, at that moment, a black shadow jumped out of the forest and landed in front of Cheng Qian, getting in his way. The heavy breathing sound was increasingly clear in the dark. A pair of green eyes shot a sinister stare at the two delicious kids.

Cheng Qian came to a sudden halt right away. He stepped back with his wooden sword in front of his chest.

The shrub around him stirred, and several other wolves quickly whipped out, encircling Cheng Qian and Puddle closely. Every wolf was as large as a foal, and they all eyeballed the two kids squarely with their fangs bared.

Puddle huddled up in Cheng Qian's bosom, not daring to utter a sound. Her lineage of the Monster Queen didn't work as a deterrent at all. Presumably, even though she was the descendant of an ancient mythological animal, these hideous beasts wouldn't be afraid of a cub who hadn't been weaned at all.

Cheng Qian stood emotionless in the encirclement of the wolves and lifted his sword. He knew he should not show any trace of timidity in the face of these creatures, for a mere second of hesitation would give them an opening for tearing him and his junior sister into shreds.

Cheng Qian moved his wrist to get the opening move of Fuyao Wooden Swordplay ready as he whispered to Puddle in his arm, "Where are your wings? Fly us out of here."

Puddle's face reddened with bated breath. But perhaps because she was so starved that she had lost strength or because she was just terrified by those wolves, only a pair of palm-sized wings sprouted from her back, so small that they could only be used as a fan when they flapped.

Cheng Qian's heart sank. As expected, upon the sight of Puddle's wings, that leader wolf perceived the weakness and vacillation in Cheng Qian's heart. Suddenly it crouched and growled as though giving an order. Seeing its move, Cheng Qian tightened the muscles in his arms to the extreme. Next, he heard a gust of sinister wind blowing from behind, then he swiftly turned around without thinking and exerted the third move of the Roc's Long Flight in an altered form. The broken wooden sword made a sharp arc

in the air and precisely evaded the beast's claw to hit a fierce chop in the jaw of that wolf.

Cheng Qian had worked hard on his swordsmanship. At least in terms of the two forms he'd practiced, he far exceeded his first senior brother, who only practiced without thorough understanding.

The leader wolf's eyes gleamed with cunning as it gave another command. Two wolves lurking aside cropped up and blocked Cheng Qian's escape.

From the beginning, Cheng Qian had already been in a half-dead state from his grief, pain, and despair, and now in face of the wolf's rapacious gaze, his fury finally overflowed.

On a wild impulse of anger, Cheng Qian went up to meet it head-on. This impulse accidentally aligned with his insight of being fearless.

His frame of mind and the swordplay brought out the best in each other. It almost seemed as if a light glinted at the edge of the wooden sword and as soon as the Roc's long Flight finished, and then the sword hilt went out of Cheng Qian's hand—that was the Tide Swordplay he'd been practicing for fun. He hit the hilt with his elbow and pushed the sword straight into the wolf's mouth.

The relentless sword tip resoundingly clashed into a fang. Cheng Qian's arm scraped against the wolf's teeth, his sleeve being torn into two parts and a one-cun deep laceration forming from his wrist to his elbow.

That wolf howled to its death, and Cheng Qian's wooden sword broke.

However, another wolf's claws had arrived, coming at Puddle's head. Cheng Qian shifted Puddle to the other hand with the suddenness of a thunderbolt, and despite his sword being broken, he swiped at the wolf's

nose with the remaining half. Heavily mauled, the wolf toppled on its back, the impact sending Cheng Qian several Chi backwards.

The blood which ran from Cheng Qian's wounded arm stained Puddle's body, its smell making her face dreadfully ashen as she trembled with extreme fright. But before Cheng Qian could comfort her, he felt the weight in his arm grow heavier, and the next thing he knew, he had been lifted into the air—Puddle had managed to unfold her wings in the nick of time.

Without any delay, the Heavenly Monster rushed into the sky, flapping her great wings, the wind throwing that leader wolf into the air.

The leader wolf hadn't thought this would happen. It snarled and sprang toward Cheng Qian's leg, but pitifully, it was already out of reach. The leader wolf sank back and circled around in anger.

With the thought of killing still over his head, Cheng Qian cast his gaze down at the leader wolf by the moonlight. The wolf was scared stiff for a bit and then withdrew its front legs with its tail tucked in, whining.

Puddle didn't fly too far with Cheng Qian. She was too young after all, and shortly after passing the valley, she got worn out, and they plunged toward a hill, floundering.

Biting his teeth, Cheng Qian propped himself up against the remaining half of his wooden sword and tore a piece of cloth off from his garment to stem the bleeding, lest it call more beasts over.

Right now, Cheng Qian had an acute pain in the wound, a body chilled by dew, and a junior sister who couldn't take care of herself, yet he still had to make fire, find food, decide on a place where they could spend the night, and constantly stay alert to the environment.

As he walked through the crisis-ridden Worriless Valley, Cheng Qian found himself robbed of time to mull over the entanglements between master and those demonic cultivators or to dwell on the sense of loneliness and vagueness of future.

The pressing matter of the moment was to walk out of this valley and take junior sister and the Sect Leader's Seal back.

On the shore of East Sea, people from Azure Dragon Island had finally arrived late, after the tumult had already subsided.

As Muchun Zhenren had never told his apprentices what kind of organization people from Azure Dragon Island were, nor did he introduce any powerful cultivators to them, the idea of pandering to them, or at the very least greeting them, didn't come to Yan Zhengming at all.

The stormy sea hadn't calmed down. Yan Zhengming asked Taoist children to send out all the small boats on the ship to search.

Li Yun and Han Yuan gathered in the cabin, rifling through the piles of books that Cheng Qian had taken out with him, while Yan Zhengming fretfully paced around while instructing, "Look for books about charms. Han Yuan, not that stock; that's still bundled, he may not have read it. Hurry up!"

"Don't rush me. I find it, likely..." Li Yun lifted a hand. "First Senior Brother, is it this one?"

Yan Zhengming immediately threw aside the book in his hand and went up to grab that book, inspecting the exposition regarding tracking charms carefully. "What the heck... is this it?"

"What does it say?" said the worried Han Yuan.

“It says...”

Just then, a Taoist boy burst in, panting, “Young Master, there’s a Zhenren asking for you.”

“What’s the fuss! I’m busy looking for people!” Yan Zhengming waved his hand without looking up and read to Li Yun and Han Yuan the annotation on that book, “It says that the tracking charm and its maker share a connection. I carved it myself, but it might as well be like a fart since I felt nothing at all after finishing it. What the hell is that connection?”

Li Yun’s face changed color when he heard that. “Senior Brother...”

“Speak straight! What do you want to say?”

“Have you ever considered, that the tracking charm we made was unsuccessful?”

Yan Zhengming was brought up short. After a good while, he mumbled, “But Copper Coin...”

With a gesture of chagrin, Yan Zhengming smacked himself on his forehead—It was all Cheng Qian’s fault, he’d always been acting like, “though I never showed off, I’m reliable,” causing him to trust this novice brat without even thinking!

Had this bastard been reliable, would he be missing now?

At this moment, another Taoist boy ran in with a tattered ribbon in his hand.

“Young Master, they found this...” said the Taoist child in utter panic.

“I tied this around junior sister’s waist—the tracking charm that had been wrapped inside it is missing!” Li Yun grabbed it over, his pupils contracted.

These young boys gazed at each other in speechless consternation inside the cabin.

Suddenly, a gruff female voice interposed, “Tracking charm? What tracking charm?”

Li Yun turned back and saw the Tang Wanqiu Zhenren, who looked like a drowned rat as she glanced at that ribbon.

What was she coming here for?

Slightly astounded, Li Yun greeted her with the etiquette of a junior, “Tang Zhenren.”

Yan Zhengming goggled ferociously at the first Taoist child who had come to inform him, rebuking him as he walked past Li Yun, “Why didn’t you notify me of senior’s arrival? What good are you?”

Tang Wanqiu waved him off indifferently and took the ribbon from Li Yun’s hand. She was silent for a moment before asking, “This isn’t your master’s, right?”

At this juncture, Yan Zhengming had no patience to chat with her. But as Tang Wanqiu was sort of a senior to them, he had to hold back the fret which had manifested in his knitted brows and said, “That’s our junior sister’s. She’s too young and we were afraid that she might get lost, so we tied that to her just in case—please forgive us for being bad hosts, as our master is missing right now. Or would you fancy a cup of tea?”

The tone of the last sentence sounded almost like an order for the guest to leave.

Luckily, Tang Wanqiu was a careless person without a subtle mind. So she didn’t hear the discourtesy in his voice at all.

Tang Wanqiu said, “I suggest you give up. A charm made by you should have already been blown into bits by those two demons.”

Yan Zhengming: “...”

She had to rub it in. Did this woman purposely come here to mock them?

Sometimes there was some truth to judging people on the basis of appearance. When talking about a person, especially a woman, who disregarded their image—unless they had some kind of story behind them, they were mostly people of Tang Zhenren’s type: maverick and incapable of reading faces.

Looking at Tang Wanqiu’s square face with a jaw wider than her forehead, Yan Zhengming was overwhelmed by moodiness, pondering how he could send her away as soon as possible. But before he could decide how to start, Tang Wanqiu cut straight to the point without saying any sympathetic platitudes, as though she were even more impatient than him, “The Lord of Azure Dragon Island asks me to take you to him; come with me.”

Yan Zhengming: “...”

Li Yun knew his senior brother’s temper well. Fearing that he would make impertinent remarks, Li Yun hurried forward and warned Yan Zhengming in an undertone, “Senior Brother.”

To his surprise, however, Yan Zhengming didn’t hop about mad or show any sign of anger. After a moment of thinking with his eyes downcast, he asked, “Why would the lord of the island see us juniors? Does he know our master?”

Tang Wanqiu’s bushy eyebrows cocked, every single hair rising as if saying, “Obviously. Why else?”

Yan Zhengming's heart thumped. He hastily said, "But our master is now missing. May I ask the lord of the island for a favor..."

"Already looking. Let's go."

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Azure Dragon Island was a typical celestial mountain that was ablaze with flowers throughout the seasons. When looking from the sea, the view was that of an island perennially permeated by a thin fog, like a peachtopia floating on the ocean, where the cultivators dressed either in sharp suits or in graceful Taoist robes.

The lord of Azure Dragon Island was counted among the Four Saints. He'd been in secluded cultivation for years on end and rarely revealed himself. Quite unexpectedly, however, he now came out especially to see Yan Zhengming, and with a genial attitude as though treating his own junior, at that. Perhaps to show sympathy for Yan Zhengming's upset, the lord of the island didn't talk much to him. After providing Zhengming's accommodations, the lord generously stated that all the resources on Azure Dragon Island were at Yan Zhengming's disposal until he found his master and junior brother and sister.

Of course, other cultivators couldn't flagrantly gossip over that like uneducated villagers. They did so beneath the veil of secrecy.

That was quite understandable, though. Numerous people piled in to kiss up to the lord of Azure Dragon Island, who didn't bother to show up even at the decennial Celestial Market. Just what had these kids done to merit his good graces?

Those brats only knew how to throw around their wealth, to say nothing of their low cultivation levels, and they still hadn't shown any restraint even after they'd come to the Azure Dragon Island. They were fiercely dislikeable.

But Yan Zhengming knew nothing about these undercurrents, and couldn't even be bothered to care about it. The lord of the island had asked for

Cheng Qian's and Puddle's *bazi*, and sent countless cultivators out on search, yet still received no news whatsoever for three days straight.

Yan Zhengming didn't know how he had made it through those three days.

On the morning of the fourth day, Yue-er, one of Yan Zhengming's maids, gently pushed open the door of his room. She had a set of tools for combing his hair in hand, and had planned to first burn the incense and then wake the young master up, but was instead surprised to find that Yan Zhengming was not in the room.

Yue-er was scared. She thought that she had gotten up late, and after preparing herself for a scolding, she walked inside hesitantly only to find that the bed had been made up by a Taoist boy, and the person living here was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Young Master?" asked Yue-er hurriedly.

"I heard that they'd gotten news about the sect leader, so Young Master got up early this morning and went to see them," answered the Taoist boy.

Yue-er stood dazed for a bit—the Yans had good ethics and never maltreated the servants, and it was only that they had spoiled Yan Zhengming. Yue-er was born to a servant of the Yan family, but as she was a girl, she was brought up almost like a half miss. In normal times on the Fuyao Mountain, her only job was to comb young master's hair, and nothing else. Even when the two devils had fought on the sea, she was safely seated inside the cabin despite the raging storm outside. This was her first time feeling human panic.

Holding a sandalwood box to her bosom, Yue-er asked again, "D-did he say when he'd return?"

The Taoist boy looked back at this insecure little girl and involuntarily toned down his voice, saying, “He didn’t. The situation is still quite unclear right now.

“This is just between us—last night, I heard Young Master speaking to second martial uncle. It’s likely that we won’t be able to go back to the Fuyao Mountain anytime soon if things go wrong. In which case, you have to keep in mind that the people on this island are all cultivators; be their conducts good or bad, they are people with powers. It wouldn’t take much more effort for them to kill us than to pinch an ant. Be sure to not run around or to displease them, clear?” added the Taoist boy in a low voice.

The lord of Azure Dragon Island seemed to be very closely connected to Fuyao Sect. He actually had considered the possibility that Muchun Zhenren and his disciples might be around the Woriless Valley and had sent his men there to wait. And yet for some reason, none of those cultivators dared to enter the valley to comb that area.

After three days’ waiting, they eventually saw Cheng Qian and Puddle come out.

Cheng Qian was as miserable as he could be at that moment. Those cultivators hadn’t expected that Muchun Zhenren had gone and that the two kids had actually walked out of the valley all on their own.

Beasts and small monsters could be seen everywhere in there, yet they still made it out alive. Some soul in the Heaven must be blessing them.

This young boy who should have been tortured by fright, however, was not so easy to deal with as they expected.

Around evening, Cheng Qian thanked a female cultivator who had brought him a bowl of vegetable congee, which she had gotten from a nearby village. After tasting it first, Cheng Qian pulled Puddle over, took a

spoonful of congee, and put it near her mouth. The last three days were indeed a purgatory for Puddle and had made her a starving ghost.

Puddle opened her mouth wide to eat, but Cheng Qian abruptly withdrew his hand, and Puddle bit the air.

She stared at him pitifully, looking as though tears were going to trickle down her face.

Cheng Qian whispered, “Remember what I said? This is yours if you do.”

Puddle hastily nodded while making a bow, her chubby hands folded in front, and then she got her very first bite of food in these recent days.

A casual observer would have taken it to be a naughty senior brother teasing his junior sister—but in actuality, the bow part was Puddle’s instinctive self-performance.

Upon their meeting with this group of strangers, Cheng Qian had immediately ordered Puddle to not show her wings in front of anyone from this moment on.

“Why did your sect accept such a small kid as a disciple?” asked the female cultivator from where she stood at the side, probably thinking this plump girl to be amusing.

Cheng Qian gave her a thin smile. “Once, my junior brother snuck off the mountain and picked her up on his way to the market. Harvests were probably bad in recent years, and her family might not have been able to afford to raise her. My junior brother found her quite pathetic, so he brought her back—you know, where 10 or 20 years are just a brief moment in the entire life of a cultivator, it’s long enough for her to grow from a babbling baby to a big girl. So it doesn’t matter that she’s small now; time flies.”

The female cultivator couldn't help joking to him, "You yourself haven't lived past that 'brief moment', yet you're talking like an adult. By the way, I think you'd better go back with us to treat your wounds; even if your senior brothers came riding flying mounts and travelled day and night, it will take them at least one or two days."

"I would go with you if I were alone. But since I'm together with my junior sister, she might cause you trouble. So we'll just wait for our senior brothers. Before my master left, he had asked me to listen to first senior brother. I'm totally clueless as to what to do right now, and I can't decide myself," replied Cheng Qian as he wiped off the congee that slipped from Puddle's mouth.

The female cultivator: "..."

This brat didn't seem clueless to her in the slightest.

Perhaps because of his young age, Cheng Qian was, in reality, not good at dealing with people. He would rarely say anything of his own initiative and wouldn't try to form ties with others, either. He was admirably courteous, but he was also as stubborn as a mule.

Cheng Qian had wounds all over his body, some from the beasts' scraping and biting, some from falls and fractures. The dried blood had glued the strip of cloth around his arm tightly to his skin.

In theory, Cheng Qian should have been exhausted to the point of falling over; after going through the Worriless Valley, one would be at least seriously wounded, if not dead—especially if he was carrying a babbling little girl with him. But contrary to expectations, Cheng Qian appeared as if nothing had happened. He would sooner sleep in the open near the Worriless Valley than leave with them; and as for what had happened in the valley, he just clammed up about it and wouldn't say a word no matter how people asked him.

Yan Zhengming finally arrived when the moon rose to the top of the willow tree.

He came alone, not bringing Li Yun or Han Yuan, or even any Taoist child. He opened the curtains and jumped off the roc-drawn carriage before it had even stopped moving.

After being haunted by anxiety for days on end, anger had been bubbling up in Yan Zhengming's stomach. But the miserable sight of Cheng Qian's bloody body drained half of it, and the remaining half spent itself after he failed to find Muchun Zhenren's figure.

Yan Zhengming ran over. He hastily caught Puddle, who jumped into his arms, and then took Cheng Qian's hand and asked eagerly, "What happened? Why did you become like this? Where have you been these days? Where's Master? Why did he leave you two here alone?"

No reply was given. Cheng Qian simply stared at him in a daze.

Feeling butterflies in his stomach, Yan Zhengming said with his heart clanging, "Xiao-Qian, what the hell happened?"

Remaining silent, Cheng Qian roved his gaze over Yan Zhengming's face and then over those strange cultivators around them.

These cultivators were from the famous Azure Dragon Island, after all. They gathered straight off that the two martial brothers had something to say, so they mindfully took their leave.

Only then did Cheng Qian release a breath. Using his uninjured arm, he fished a small seal out of his bosom and gave it to Yan Zhengming, saying in a barely audible voice, "This is the Sect Leader's Seal, First Senior Brother, Master asked me to give it to you."

For a long time, Yan Zhengming's mind went blank. When it struck him what that meant, he jerked backward, his face suddenly drained of color.

The seal on Cheng Qian's bloodstained and dusty palm was like a dreadful monster to him, and his eyes darkened with fear.

But what Cheng Qian was going to say pursued Yan Zhengming to the brutal end.

"Master's dead," said Cheng Qian. "He said, you are the leader of Fuyao Sect from now on."

"No..." Yan Zhengming shook his head by instinct. He frantically pushed Cheng Qian aside and dissolved into sputter. "I'm not... y-y-you take this away, I don't want it! What are you talking about, how can Master be dead?"

"I watched him die."

"No way!" Yan Zhengming goggled, nothing coming out of his mouth but stout denial. "No way!"

Cheng Qian went silent. He continued holding out the Sect Leader's Seal while watching Yan Zhengming with a deep gaze, the grief on his face so heavy that it felt wrong on the face of such a young boy.

"It's real," he muttered. "Senior Brother, it's rea..."

Cheng Qian hadn't finished speaking before his head suddenly tilted sideways, and he collapsed to the ground without warning.

Yan Zhengming subconsciously reached out his hand to catch him, and through that contact, a grisly bloodstain rubbed onto his white sleeve.

Cheng Qian's body was freezing cold, and Yan Zhengming nearly thought he had stopped breathing. He turned Cheng Qian over in a hurry, reaching out two fingers to feel Cheng Qian's breath. But his fingers were shaking so hard that he didn't get a result for a long time.

Puddle usually didn't utter much sound, for she could not speak yet. Therefore, at this moment, she had no way other than crying to express her feelings—in recent few days, she had almost used up all the tears she had accumulated since her birth.

Yan Zhengming's ears were filled with buzz and his head was a blank. He gripped and tried to heat up Cheng Qian's hand, but it remained icily cold. For a moment, all he knew was to keep mechanically repeating, "Don't cry, Puddle, don't cry."

He had no clue how long he had knelt rigidly on the ground—maybe a long time, maybe just a few seconds, until someone grasped his shoulder and shook him back to himself. Yan Zhengming looked up blankly and saw a nameless cultivator looking at him in worry.

Yan Zhengming thought his countenance must be paler than a ghost's, for he found the cultivator seemed to have misunderstood something as he subconsciously did the same thing as Yan Zhengming—he reached out a finger to feel Cheng Qian's breath. A few seconds later, the cultivator let out a sigh of relief. He looked up and said, "He's breathing. I have some pills and medicine at my place. Don't worry, it may not be so serious."

Yan Zhengming nodded and bit his own tongue fiercely. The acute sting and the blood smell pulled him completely back from the stupor. He pulled himself together and took the Sect Leader's Seal from Cheng Qian, holding it tightly in his hand. Then he bent to pick Cheng Qian up while saying to Puddle, "Can you walk on your own?"

Puddle cautiously stood on her feet and stretched her arm to get a grip of Yan Zhengming's garment.

After a day and a night's travel, the roc carried them back to the Azure Dragon Island. Being at his wits' end, Yan Zhengming felt suffocated. Rationally, he knew what Cheng Qian said was most probably true. Much more often than not, Master treated them with excessive indulgence and inadequate strictness. As long as he was still breathing, there was no chance that he would leave Cheng Qian and Puddle alone at such a dangerous place.

Li Yun and Han Yuan had been anxiously awaiting Yan Zhengming's return on Azure Dragon Island, and as soon as they saw him, they rushed up.

"What happened to Xiao-Qian?"

"Where's Master?"

"Ah, why didn't Master come back with you?"

"Where did you find them?"

"I don't know!" Yan Zhengming strode past his junior brothers, the restlessness in his heart making him want to scream. "Don't ask me! Shut up! Just wait for him to wake up!"

But Cheng Qian remained unconscious. For one thing, he was still wounded; for another, he definitely hadn't gotten any rest for the last few days, as he had to look out for Puddle in the Worriless Valley.

Yan Zhengming stayed immovably by Cheng Qian's side. In the beginning, he hoped and prayed for Cheng Qian to wake, and was on the edge of his seat, desperately wanting to know what exactly occurred in the Worriless Valley. But the longer it lasted, the more fearful he became.

As soon as he closed eyes, he would remember the scene where Cheng Qian was covered in blood and looked deeply at him while telling him Master's death, which deprived him of sleep.

In such a state of agitation, an idea naturally formed in Yan Zhengming's mind. He thought, "I may just go home and be a simple young master."

Once this idea flashed into his head, it soon took root and dominated his thoughts.

Right! Anyway, his family was rich enough to ensure his life of extravagance and pleasure. Why should he cultivate? Why should he seek the Tao?

As for junior brothers and sister, he could take them home together. They were free to do anything they wanted, whether to continue practicing martial arts or to study for official ranks. All they would need was only a few pairs of chopsticks, after all.

Making him the sect leader?—don't joke. The sole job he was competent for in his life was to be a young master!

He couldn't even make a perfect primary talisman, not to mention his unremarkable swordsmanship. And forget about the formidable masters on Azure Dragon Island, even their errand Taoist boys had higher cultivation levels than him. If Yan Zhengming became the sect leader, what would the sect be like?

Thinking that, Yan Zhengming bounced to feet and called in a Taoist boy, "Zheshi! Zheshi!"

Zheshi trotted in front of him. "Young Master."

“Fetch me a writing brush and paper, I’ll write home,” ordered Yan Zhengming in an urgent tone. “Pack up our things and get the ship ready. As soon as Xiao-Qian wake up, I’ll go bid farewell to the Lord of Azure Dragon Island.”

Zheshi was stupefied. “Young Master, are we going back to Fuyao Mountain?”

Yan Zhengming: “What Fuyao Mountain? Home!”

“Young Master, what about the sect...” said Zheshi, seized by astonishment.

Yan Zhengming waved his hand. “There’s no Fuyao Sect anymore. It’s dissolved, you know? Be quick, we’ll set off in a couple of days.”

Zheshi ran away as if to escape.

Two days had passed by the time Cheng Qian woke up. When he tried to move a bit, a hand immediately fell on top of his forehead. A familiar fragrance of orchids came swelling over, but somehow this smell had thinned a lot. Cheng Qian moved his lips and said soundlessly, “Senior Brother.”

His throat hurt so much that he lost his voice.

Yan Zhengming helped him sit up and gave him a bowl of water without saying a word.

Cheng Qian finished it up in one swallow and only then faintly asked, “Where’s junior sister?”

“Yue-er and other maids are looking after her.”

In a daze, Cheng Qian's forehead pinched, and he asked again, "The Sect Leader's Seal... did I give it to you?"

Yan Zhengming pulled out a string from his neck, and there was a small seal tied to it.

Cheng Qian's muddled and tense look finally eased a bit, but soon tiredness crept up to his face.

Fuyao Sect had always had chaotic days. Older ones didn't know how to humor younger ones; younger ones showed no respect for older ones. It felt like it was just yesterday that the two of them had a quarrel, yet today when they faced each other, everything was as different as if a lifetime had passed.

Yan Zhengming sighed and asked softly, "Are you hungry?"

Cheng Qian shook his head. He sat in bed, dazed, after a while, broke the quietness in the room. "Master, Junior Sister, and I, we got there because of the flawed talisman we made that night."

Yan Zhengming didn't interrupt him. He sat there silently, hearing Cheng Qian out.

Cheng Qian's strength hadn't recovered. On and off, it took him a good half hour to make the whole thing clear. But after that, Yan Zhengming couldn't say anything for a long time.

The candle flickered, the light somewhat burning. Yan Zhengming came back to earth and straightened up with all his strength. He suddenly felt the Sect Leader's Seal on his neck was a thousand tons heavy, almost weighing down his neck.

He stood up and gently placed a hand on Cheng Qian's head. In his tenderest voice ever, Yan Zhengming said, "I'll have someone get you a bowl of congee. Eat some before applying the medicine."

Cheng Qian nodded tamely.

Yan Zhengming turned to walk outside, saying to himself inwardly, *"Alright, now that I know what happened and he has woken up, we can go home tomorrow."*

Home was the best. You would only have to hold out your hand to be dressed and open your mouth to be fed, no need to practice swordplay in the early morning or to exercise cultivation methods in the late night.

Just as Yan Zhengming reached the door, his heart heavy, Cheng Qian suddenly uttered, "Hold on, Senior Brother. You didn't discard my books, did you? Can you have someone bring me some sword books?"

Yan Zhengming's hand, which had touched the door, paused all at once. He stood ramrod straight with his back towards Cheng Qian, as though his entire body had been frozen.

"Anything wrong?" Cheng Qian was perplexed. "Did you throw them away?"

"You can't even get up, why do you want to read sword books?" inquired Yan Zhengming, his voice hoarse.

"Martial Grandfather said we linked up Fuyao Sect's broken bloodline," Cheng Qian said. "The bloodline won't break just because I can't get up—and Master also asked me to work harder on swordsmanship."

Yan Zhengming stood transfixed for a long time before he suddenly turned around, walked back, and swept Cheng Qian into his arms.

The Sect Leader's Seal wedged in Yan Zhengming's clavicle, hurting him. He thought, *"Go to hell! This sect is not dissolved. I am the sect leader, I am not dead!"*

He was holding Cheng Qian tightly, desperately, his whole body slightly trembling from stiffened muscles. For a moment, Cheng Qian thought that he must be crying.

Cheng Qian waited long for Yan Zhengming's tears. But after a while had passed, what he received were comforting words which first senior brother spoke into his ear.

"It's okay," Yan Zhengming said, "It's okay, Xiao-Qian. Senior brother is here."

Volume II Chapter 33

Li Yun tripped on the doorstep of Cheng Qian's room, the pile of worn books nearly flying out of his hands. But before he could exclaim in surprise, someone else in the room had done that for him—inside the room, Cheng Qian held a needle and was pricking the blisters on Yan Zhengming's hands one after the other.

Cheng Qian's moves were very neat. Insert the needle, slightly shake it, pinch the blister, and then it was done. Cheng Qian deftly and swiftly repeated the routine, tormenting his delicate Sect Leader Senior Brother and making him holler in pain, "Be gentle! Cheng Qian, what were you, a porter!? Ah—" [1](#)

"No. I was probably a pig butcher," said Cheng Qian apathetically.

"Show some fraternal respect... Ouch!" Yan Zhengming almost shot off the chair. "Who gives a damn about the sword, I am *not* practicing anymore!"

Li Yun hurriedly closed the door tight, in case the last bit of dignity of Fuyao Sect be lost.

For the very first time, Young Master Yan... I mean, Sect Leader Yan, got blisters from practicing swordplay. He suffered for it. Thus he spewed a string of swear words, not giving a damn that he lost his face in front of his young junior brothers.

In the corner, Han Yuan observed Yan Zhengming with trepidation, looking as though the Fuyao Wooden Swordplay had left some shadows in his heart.

"I just came across this," explained Li Yun, spreading out the pile of books on the desk while trying to ignore the Sect Leader's howl of pain. "They are the annals of Azure Dragon Island, in which are recorded several major

events regarding every renowned sect through the years. Some of them mentioned us.”

“Mentioned us? What does it say?” asked Han Yuan, craning his neck.

“The earliest record is dated to the establishment of Azure Dragon Island. An elder of Fuyao Sect along with two disciples came to extend congratulations on behalf of the sect leader,” Li Yun said. “His name was mentioned as the very first among the list of guests, which seemed quite honored...”

Yan Zhengming hissed from a prick and dismissed Li Yun’s words with a wave of his hand. “Skip the prosperity in early days and jump to the part where we began to peter out.”

Li Yun returned to flipping the pages. “As I recall... Oh, here it is. For some reason, after returning from the Celestial Market, the sixth sect leader of Fuyao Sect suddenly announced that he was going to simplify the sect, and that only two disciples were allowed for each person. His successor, however, abolished this rule and accepted a total of eighteen disciples. These disciples fought and schemed against each other, and as a result, few people survived the competition for the position of the sect leader. That’s when the sect gradually anguished.”

“Really?” As he asked, Yan Zhengming took out the Sect Leader’s Seal. “Anyone of you wants this? Just take it away. I don’t want these hardships, I’m going to pack up and go home.”

Nobody paid any attention to him.

Li Yun buried himself in those musty old books, leafing through them as he said, “I assume that that’s the time when the sect rules changed to forbid internal strife. And after that... our sect produced quite a few demonic cultivators, including even two Lord Beimings...”

“Three,” Cheng Qian corrected him.

Li Yun sighed, “Alright, three then—but what’s even worse, the annals also recorded a senior of our sect who was a devout believer of astrology. He saw all cultivation methods and sword techniques as trifling skills and taught his disciples nothing but astrology. In his generation, even the Fuyao Wooden Swordplay was nearly lost. There was another senior who was keen on traveling. It’s said that during his time at the helm, his last disciple had only met him once in his entire life... But the one who had hid Fuyao Sect from people’s sight in the real sense was in fact our Martial Grandfather. But there aren’t many accounts about him. It only mentioned that he was always in secluded cultivation and kept to himself. Every time the Celestial Market opened, he’d send Master and... you-know-who here.”

Speaking of which, Li Yun lifted his head and said, “I say, Fuyao Sect had actually been at the head of the Top Ten Sects back then, despite all that.”

Yan Zhengming was defeated. “Now I see. Our sect had a distant origin, a long development, and abounded in demonic cultivators and all types of freaks. What kind of illustrious sect are we? —as far as I am concerned, the reason why our sect can struggle on till today was probably because some worried ancestor was blessing us in Heaven.”

“What shall we do then? Pack up and go home?” asked Han Yuan tactlessly.

Cheng Qian and Li Yun glared at him at the same time.

“I wasn’t the first one to say that. It was First Senior Brother!” screamed Han Yuan, feeling unjustly treated.

“Just now I was summoned by the Lord of Azure Dragon Island; he invited us to stay here for some time,” announced Yan Zhengming slowly as he

leaned against a table. “He said there will be lectures after the Celestial Market and that he had kept seats for us.”

“How long is ‘some time’? Are we not going back to Fuyao Mountain?” asked Li Yun, somewhat antsy.

“I’m not sure,” said Yan Zhengming with biting sarcasm. “That Tang Zhenren looks like she has been a beggar for two or three decades, yet they still say that she has only traveled outside for ‘some time’.”

Li Yun unconsciously nibbled his fingers and said, “But I heard that the lord of the island had retired from society for a long time. Why would he suddenly want us to stay?”

Yan Zhengming said, “I don’t know. It’s said that he and Master have got history.”

For years, Yan Zhengming had secluded himself on the mountain and was hence unworldly. In addition, Master’s exhortations before leaving the mountain just ran off him like water off a duck’s back. So at this moment, Yan Zhengming basically knew next to nothing and dared not to consult others. Meanwhile, there were so many things running over his head that after this period of time, he was utterly fatigued both mentally and physically.

“Copper Coin.” Yan Zhengming gave Cheng Qian a kick. “Put down your burin and raise your head and say something.”

That move interrupted Cheng Qian and dispersed the *qi* around his hand, causing the talisman to turn to scrap.

Cheng Qian frugally switched to an ordinary burin and shaved off the notches on the talisman, saying insipidly, “Say what?”

Since he broke out of the Woriless Valley with Puddle, Cheng Qian had done nothing but practice swordsmanship and cultivate. Whenever someone came to him, there was sure to be either a wooden sword or burin in his hand.

Because of that, Yan Zhengming had tried several times to stop him, nearly getting into a fight over it, but Cheng Qian simply didn't take it seriously.

Only then did Yan Zhengming realize how helpless Master had felt for them when he was alive.

Cheng Qian cleaned up the wood shavings and unhurriedly said, "Do we have anything that others would covet? Sect leader senior brother's beauty? Don't flatter yourself."

His stiff and cold words dejected his martial brothers and effectively terminated this brief meeting. Li Yun and Yan Zhengming exchanged a glance of resignation, not knowing what they should do with this third junior brother. After all, neither of them had witnessed Master's death.

Yan Zhengming signalled Li Yun with a wink. Li Yun took the hint and left with Han Yuan.

Yan Zhengming, on the other hand, stayed in Cheng Qian's room. He casually picked out a book of the latest record about Fuyao Sect and started reading it silently by Cheng Qian's side. Both of them paid no attention to each other until dusk, when Xueqing came in with a lunch box. Xueqing took a surprised look at Yan Zhengming, who was still reluctant to leave. "Young... Sect Leader."

"Bring my things over, I'll live here for a few days," ordered Yan Zhengming with perfect composure, disregarding Cheng Qian's expression which seemed to be saying, 'Why haven't you gotten lost?'

Cheng Qian's indifferent face began to crack.

Without consulting with Cheng Qian, Yan Zhengming said directly to Xueqing, "I'm afraid he'll take Master's death too hard, so I'll stay here to watch him a few days."

Cheng Qian had a constipated look on his face. After a moment, he squeezed a sentence out of his mouth with great effort, "Senior Brother, you worry too much. I'm quite good."

"What I say goes." Yan Zhengming turned him down tersely and stood up to move about under Cheng Qian's scared gaze. He was prepared to give Cheng Qian a 'great time'.

Plainly, Yan Zhengming had mastered the knack of being a sect leader—when it came to practicing swordsmanship, he would kick up a row, shouting that he'd quit and go home, but when he wanted to throw his weight around, he'd then think of the Sect Leader's Seal.

"Call some men in, by the way," said Yan Zhengming. "And get the floor cleaned. Can't you see the hairs—also, move my censer over and tell Yue-er to prepare the incense."

Before Cheng Qian could say anything, Yan Zhengming had finished the whole process of appropriating Cheng Qian's room as his own. Then he threw Cheng Qian by the dinner table and demanded, "Get ready to eat."

Cheng Qian silently reached out his hand to pick up the chopsticks. But before he could touch them, Yan Zhengming slapped his hand away.

"Wash hands." Yan Zhengming frowned.

Since Taoist children were still in the room, Cheng Qian didn't want to defy his first senior brother, who recently became the sect leader, in front of

them. So after staring at Yan Zhengming for a few seconds, Cheng Qian dipped his hands in the basin and reached out again to take the teacup.

And was slapped by Yan Zhengming a second time.

Yan Zhengming: “Drinking tea before the meal? What’s wrong with you?”

Cheng Qian: “...”

He had a feeling that this day wouldn’t end well.

“Begin with cold dishes. How can you alternate cold dishes with hot ones?”

“Who asked you to serve desserts when the meal is not finished?”

“What? You use the same bowl to have rice and soup?”

“Are you kidding me? This eggplant isn’t peeled!? Are unpeeled eggplants really fit for human consumption?”

Cheng Qian came to the end of his endurance. He plopped the chopsticks on the table and stood up to leave.

“What are you going to do?” asked Yan Zhengming, unable to make heads or tail of his move.

“I don’t feel good, and I can’t even swallow food,” Cheng Qian said. “I’m going to practice swordplay in the backyard.”

Every morning and evening, Cheng Qian would practice swordplay for two hours without fail. But today he felt that two hours were not enough. He wanted to practice for the whole night.

Once he was tired out and felt compelled to go back, he found that his room had been changed to the Gossamer Cave² by first senior brother.

And the evil sitting inside the Gossamer Cave wouldn't let him in. "Go take a bath. Do you want to sleep with this sweat?"

Cheng Qian's expression told Yan Zhengming that yes, that was what he had been thinking of doing and what he had always done before. Therefore, Young Master Yan turned around and called in Xueqing right away, "Get me a new sheet!"

After Xueqing left, Cheng Qian shouted to him, "Can't you just go back to your own place?"

Yan Zhengming: "No. Just look at you. I have to watch over you these days—do you practice swordplay this late every day?"

A blue vein stood out on Cheng Qian's forehead. Neglecting Yan Zhengming's question, he said, "I won't sleep with you!"

"You think I want to sleep with you?" Yan Zhengming fumed. "Even a chopping board is softer than your bed!"

Cheng Qian turned to leave. "Fine. I'll go sleep on the chopping board in the kitchen. Sect Leader Senior Brother, please do as you like."

Yan Zhengming shouted to the baffled Taoist boys standing outside the door, "Take him down!"

Cheng Qian always treated others—even the Taoist children from Fuyao Mountain—in a slightly distant and urbane manner, so he surely wouldn't

get into a fight with these innocent bystanders. Hence, Yan Zhengming got his way.

The brocade quilt brought from the Land of the Tender caused Cheng Qian to sneeze so hard that his eyes streamed tears. Yan Zhengming threw a handkerchief at him with a disgusted look and said with a frown, “Is there anything wrong with your nose?”

Cheng Qian picked that handkerchief up with two fingers, stretched out his arm, and tossed it away. Then he produced a book about the taboos on charms, saying, “I think it’s your brain that is wrong.”

Yan Zhengming spread the quilt over Cheng Qian’s face and grabbed the book. “Sleep.”

Cheng Qian: “Give it back!”

As such, they started tussling over the book and banished all thoughts of sleep.

An intact *Taboos on Charms* came within an inch of being torn apart. In the end, Cheng Qian loosened his grip out of care for the book while Yan Zhengming took advantage of that, threw aside the book, and put out the light.

Cheng Qian resentfully ground his teeth in the darkness and tucked himself in under the quilt—out of sight, out of mind.

The winner, Yan Zhengming, crossed his hands behind his head. His sense of triumph was soon in and soon out. Cheng Qian gave him the cold shoulder and Yan Zhengming just lay flat in the bed, staring vacantly at the bed curtain.

It was a long time before Yan Zhengming's voice suddenly ruffled the silence, "Now I know what it feels like to tread on thin ice and to stand on the edge of an abyss."

Cheng Qian tucked himself in the quilt, saying nothing. Perhaps for him, Yan Zhengming was exactly the vexing "abyss" for the moment.

Yan Zhengming became reticent before he went on speaking to himself, "After the Celestial Market, there'll be lectures. Many rogue cultivators³ would seize the opportunity and come for advanced study. Second and fourth junior brothers haven't crossed the threshold of absorbing *qi*, so I am considering staying. To lay foundations at least... we can't just go back to Fuyao Mountain without any skills."

Just how ridiculous it was, to think that they had to audit others' lectures to learn some trifling skills in the same way that rootless rogue cultivators did, despite Fuyao Sect being a decent sect.

"I have promised the lord of the island to stay, but I didn't mean to depend on Azure Dragon Island," Yan Zhengming paused and then added, as though to convince somebody, "Really."

Cheng Qian had poked his head out of the quilt without Yan Zhengming noticing when, his face sideways and looking at his senior brother in silence.

Cheng Qian still had an immature visage, but the eyes on his pinched face radiated a staunch gaze embellished with childish brightness and innocence.

'What was I doing when I was at his age?' Yan Zhengming thought to himself.

Looking at Cheng Qian, he felt torn and sorry, and words just popped out of his mouth in an uncontrolled manner, "Ten years, in at most ten years, we'll

go back.”

But he regretted it as soon as he finished that. Yan Zhengming turned his head back with a painful mood, not looking at Cheng Qian anymore, and swiftly went back on his words. “I was just saying. It wouldn’t be better if we can, but never mind if we failed. Don’t get your hopes up.”

‘... Fine. He’s only reliable when pigs fly,’ Cheng Qian thought.

Sometimes, one person or some people might be undergoing upheavals, but time stops for no one, and the world continues moving on and on.

While these young boys were anxiously seeking their way out, the Celestial Market opened as scheduled.

The so-called “Celestial Market” on Azure Dragon Island was actually a very grand decennial exposition, and a ten-li-long street had been devoted to trade in pills, talismans, magic tools, manuals, and so on. Each sect would send their younger generations to come to make friends with like-minded people, and those disciples who were old enough to travel by themselves could even choose to go in a group after the Celestial Market rounded off.

On top of that, the key focus was nothing other than the “Azure Dragon Competition” which was long waited by every rogue cultivator across the country.

The lecture hall of Azure Dragon Island was the most admired place by innumerable rogue cultivators. Cultivators, even mortals, who failed to make their way into a prominent organization would come here to take a chance, hoping to receive guidance from a great teacher so that they could embark on the true path of cultivation.

Those lucky enough to rise above the common herd might even be accepted into Azure Dragon Island, even though they wouldn't be counted as a full disciple. But to say the least, with years spent in the lecture hall, one would definitely acquire some basic skills which would confer him the ability to seek his fortune on his own travel.

Unfortunately, due to the limited capacity of the lecture hall, after going through rounds of elimination, only one to two percent of all enrollees would be able to stay.

But in Fuyao Sect's case, the Lord of Azure Dragon Island obviously opened the back door for them; otherwise, these kids might not necessarily survive the elimination of the Azure Dragon Competition.

At Han Yuan's instigation, the disciples of Fuyao Sect decided to go to the Celestial Market and have some fun.

The market was interesting. Many mortals mixed with the crowd and couldn't be told apart from cultivators at first glance. But Yan Zhengming soon found that the way they communicated or traded was entirely different—only mortals would use currency while cultivators did barter.

Even if Yan Zhengming were carrying hundreds of thousands of paper money with him, he could buy nothing but mortal things at the Celestial Market. Don't even think about those magic tools.

The Azure Dragon Competition was held on the Azure Dragon Platform at the end of the street.

The Azure Dragon Platform only covered an area of three or four Zhang square, but there seemed to be a certain charm cast on it—once you stepped onto it, the platform would look so boundless that it was even able to contain illusions of high mountains, great rivers and vast oceans. Tang

Wanqiu and some other cultivators stood in a circle around the platform, perhaps to preserve order.

Any cultivator confident in himself could jump onto the platform to have an open fight with someone else, while those who hadn't crossed the threshold of cultivation might pick an illusion to test his own conduct, willpower, aptitude, and so on.

For the sake of fairness, everybody was allowed to spectate.

When Yan Zhengming and his junior brothers managed to find themselves seats in a nearby teahouse, two cultivators were in combat, each using a saber and a sword respectively. Unlike the battle against Jiang Peng on the sea, in a competition of this level, every single move on both sides could be clearly seen.

The swordsman's moves were very fancy with agileness which embodied his hard work. But once the fanciness went past a certain point, it appeared redundant. After two or three hundred clashes, the unimpressive saber wielder suddenly spotted his opponent's weak point. He pressed his saber ahead with a jolt, jerking it upward and hitting the swordsman's sword into the air with a clang.

The spectators around gave cheers.

"First Senior Brother, when can we use real swords?" asked Han Yuan with admiration.

"When you won't drop your wooden sword on your feet," said Yan Zhengming as he stared fixedly at the platform.

Cheng Qian chuckled by his side and then said to Han Yuan, "Master said that the swordplay of our sect is different from the rest; we'll have to wait some years."

With that, he remembered the wooden sword which had been held steadily in Master's hand on that stormy day and couldn't help but append, "Besides, as long as your moves embody the sword will, wooden swords are not necessarily inferior to iron swords..."

Before Cheng Qian could finish his words, Li Yun suddenly pulled him and warned him in a low voice, "Xiao-Qian, stop talking nonsense!"

Cheng Qian was confused. He raised his head and saw a swarthy man in the next seat looking at him coldly.

Cheng Qian had no clue what was wrong. Upon their gazes meeting, that man stood up and overlooked Cheng Qian as he said, "Wooden swords are not necessarily inferior to iron swords—you must have profound understandings on the Tao of the sword, little brother?"

Just then, the rogue cultivator who had lost just now came down from the Azure Dragon Platform and walked to the side of the black man, calling, "Brother."

Cheng Qian latched on to what was going on right away. He thought this was really strange. *This guy was directing his anger at him for his own brother's defeat?*

Evidently, Han Yuan felt the same as he did on this point. The little beggar hated his little senior brother being offended and advanced right away, a mouthful of swear words on the tip of his tongue.

But before he could spout them out, Li Yun had swiftly grabbed him. "Don't stir up trouble!"

Yan Zhengming stuck his arm out in front of the grudging Cheng Qian and made a lazy obeisance to the other side, saying, "This kid is talking

irresponsibly, he would even say a coal ball is white. You may just laugh that off, brother.”

Li Yun felt a spurt of fatigue after he heard first senior brother talk about a coal ball before an actual piece of black charcoal. He knew that first senior brother had intended to be a peacemaker, but the words somehow sounded like a provocation after they went through Yan Zhengming’s mouth.

A born nuisance—what a special talent!

That swarthy man’s face went darker as expected. His defeated brother whispered to him, and a few seconds later, his eyes settled on the wooden sword in Cheng Qian’s hand.

Then he snorted, “What? ‘Fuyāo’ (*place the hand on the waist*) Sect? I’ve never heard of such. I don’t think there’s a need to enter the lecture hall now, since any nobody is able to get in using their *connections*. Perhaps the Azure Dragon Competition’s fame is overblown, just to cheat fools like you who don’t know the truth!”

Tang Wanqiu, who was standing by the Azure Dragon Platform keeping the law, had obviously heard that, and her visage immediately changed as though storms were coming. But since she dared not abandon her duty without permission, all she could do was shoot stabbing glances at that black charcoal and the disciples of Fuyao Sect. She probably wanted to kick all of them out of here.

Yan Zhengming wasn’t bothered by his words at all. He thought, ‘*He’s speaking ill of the Azure Dragon Island anyway, what does it matter to me?*’

Thus he sneered and lifted his foot to leave.

Cheng Qian wasn’t so unthinking as him. He had noticed Tang Wanqiu’s face change.

Although the black charcoal had spoken rudely of Azure Dragon Island, the trouble was ultimately caused by them. Many people had initially borne strong resentment against them, as the lord of the island had summoned them several times. If they left as though nothing had happened at this point, those people would most likely give them a hard time in the future.

Yan Zhengming: “Xiao-Qian, time to go.”

Cheng Qian turned a deaf ear to him and remained in place. Flicking his fingers across the edge of his wooden sword, he slowly said, “Oh? So you mean, this brother who was disarmed... must have some genuine abilities?”

1. A porter is someone who carries things to places. They’re muscle-bound and treat things roughly. A modern equivalent would be something like, ‘You’re throwing all of my stuff around! What are you, a rush-service deliveryman!?’
2. a cave possessed by several female spider evils in *Journey to the West*.
3. Independent cultivators unaffiliated with any sect, clan, or other martial organizations.

T/N: The previous translators used the words 'Senior Brother' and 'Junior Brother', but I've decided to use the words 'Shixiong' and 'Shidi' instead in response to my followers' request (I'm also more used to using these words).

Nobody had expected this development. The crowd, which was gathered closely around them, immediately backed off and left out a large space for them.

Some of the bystanders openly put their heads together in discussion, trying to figure out their origins.

The Fuyao Sect had secluded themselves from human eyes for a long time. Other than the formidable masters who had lived for thousands of years from back then, not many people had ever heard of the sect now. It just had to be that this sect with unknown origins had been putting up a wealthy and high-ranking act since that day on the port of the East Sea, that people couldn't possibly not know them. Everyone had heard of the wastrels in this sect.

Even if cultivators wouldn't care about worldly matters and wealth, could they really be so indifferent when the Island Lord also gave these people special treatment?

Yan ZhengMing and his group, who never interacted much with outsiders, didn't know that they had already become a thorn in these people's eyes.

Cheng Qian, with his figure of an eleven- to twelve-year-old boy, stood there without moving, a lone wooden sword that looked like a child's toy in his hand.

Somebody sneered among the crowd, "What a cocky child. Is there no senior in the sect to keep him in line?"

Another one said, "What, didn't you hear that the Island Lord had allowed them to enter the Lecture Hall? What kind of honorable sect would let their disciples enter other people's lecture halls?"

"That's quite strange. Then why does the Island Lord give them such special treatment?"

"Who knows? It's probably the young master of a wealthy family, or even a relative of the royal family. Maybe they had spent large sums of money to acquire a rare treasure and swayed the Island Lord, so they were allowed in."

"Thinking that anyone could be a cultivator, what an unrealistic dream. Is the path of cultivation so easy to tread?"

Yan ZhengMing had practically been driven mad. He finally understood that Cheng Qian's reliability was only a flower in the mirror, the moon reflected on the water [1] — It didn't really exist!

Face cold as ice, he gritted out in a low voice through clenched teeth, "Cheng, Qian!"

Cheng Qian wasn't deaf, of course he had heard those comments. He immediately understood then — their days on the island wasn't 'going to be' difficult, it had already become difficult starting then.

After making a such a show, his karma bore fruit early too. Cheng Qian had suspicions that his master's words on the boat back then were a premonition of sorts.

But now that things had come to this point...

Cheng Qian didn't actually want to make any real move, he had only meant to put up an act for the people of Azure Dragon Island to see.

Firstly, the other party had lost earlier, it wouldn't be reasonable for him to get on the platform again. Secondly, Cheng Qian knew his own age. Let's not talk about these cultivators — even among the common folks, it wouldn't be reasonable for a large grown-up man to pick a fight with a barely adolescent boy.

At this point, Cheng Qian finally realized that he might have unwittingly jumped onto the tiger's back [2].

If he were a good boy who was good with words, he could have easily talked his way out of this situation. He wasn't any kind of person with status anyway, the top of his head could barely reach that man's chest, so he didn't need to consider his face much, his life was most important — But Cheng Qian had never been an unruly brat to begin with.

Mind racing, he quickly went through all the exchange of blows that he'd seen on the platform earlier. When he finished, he did not retreat and steeled himself instead, thinking: "Come at me if you want, it's not like I'm afraid of you."

Cheng Qian refused to back down and ignored Yan ZhengMing's warnings. Acting like the bystanders didn't exist, he cupped his fist with his other hand and said to the rogue cultivator, "I've learned a bit of swordplay myself, but I'm not very skilled yet. My master still wouldn't let me use an iron sword. I'd appreciate any pointers from you, Brother [3]."

It was unclear what kind of sect out in the wilderness had produced this defeated rogue cultivator, but he didn't care much for face or respect. After hearing those words, he immediately responded, "Giving pointers is too much of an honor for me. Since Young Master could enter the Lecture Hall without participating in the competition, you must have some kind of unique talent."

The moment he finished speaking, a small part of the crowd laughed in a soft voice — probably at his lack of shame.

One of the bystanders who'd been watching the spectacle interrupted then, "Second Brother Zhang, this young brother has challenged you, so accept his challenge. If you win, maybe the Island Lord would also give you special privilege!"

Han Yuan said angrily, "What if you lose? Kneel down and... mmph!"

Li Yun reached out to cover his mouth, completely shutting up this troublemaker.

The rogue cultivator made a show of raising his brows, "Aiya, what did that little brother say just now? What would happen if I lose?"

Cheng Qian slowly levelled his wooden sword, made an opening gesture, and said mildly, "I wouldn't dare. My Shidi's words were insolent, do pardon him — Please."

Yan ZhengMing fumed with anger and decided to grab Cheng Qian back without caring for anything else. But he had only taken one step when a folding fan appeared out of nowhere to block his way.

He saw a scholarly man wearing a long robe, eyes slanted and sharp. The man swept a glance toward Yan ZhengMing and said in a slightly frivolous manner, “Ah, don’t be in such a hurry to stop them, Sect Leader Yan. Let us witness the skill of your sect’s favorite disciple.”

“Out of my way!” Yan ZhengMing struck at that person’s wrist with the base of his sword.

Li Yun, “Eldest Shixiong, don’t...”

Before Yan ZhengMing’s sword could even brush against the corner of that person’s clothes, a formless great energy collided with his sword’s hilt. The force of the collision went along his arm toward his chest. After suffering this blow, Yan ZhengMing retreated three steps, a suffocating feeling in his chest, and almost vomited a mouthful of blood.

Li Yun hurried to support him from behind. “Shixiong!”

Yan ZhengMing forced himself to swallow the metallic taste in his throat and glared at the man in long robe.

That person showed no regard for him at all. He calmly unfurled his folding fan and made a show of fanning himself. On the fan, written in a colorful and elaborate fashion, was the line ‘Think thrice before you act [4]’. He smiled meaningfully as he said, “Such recklessness is ill-fitting for a sect leader.”

This person was clearly here to stir trouble for them!

That rogue cultivator had lost in the Azure Dragon Competition anyway, so he didn't have much to consider. He didn't even care that Cheng Qian only had a worn out wooden sword in his hand. Throwing aside all earlier pretenses, he charged forward with a slash of his sword.

This wasn't a strike that could be stopped easily. It was unclear where he had obtained his sword, but there were enhancing incantations carved onto it. The rogue cultivator also practiced some kind of strange cultivation method, that before the sword even landed a hit, an eerie wind had arrived first, causing an irritating pain on the skin.

The wooden sword truly wasn't a strong object. Cheng Qian didn't have his Master's skill, so he avoided the tip of the sword and dodged with a twist of his body.

The rogue cultivator saw that he would only retreat and dodge instead of meeting the strikes, and immediately became frenzied. He jumped around quickly, using his showy and fancy swordplay that the eyes could hardly follow, and forced Cheng Qian to move all over the place to dodge him.

The scholar standing in Yan ZhengMing's way watched those two like he was watching a monkey show. He smiled. "Your honorable sect's disciple is still so young, but he has great talent to be a counterattacker."

He ironically 'praised' Cheng Qian for only being able to dodge and retreat. Yan ZhengMing's sword-wielding hand turned green at the knuckles. From the day he was born till now, when had he ever suffered such disgrace?

The rogue cultivator closed in on Cheng Qian and smiled maliciously, "Does your sect's brilliant swordplay only teach you to dodge and retreat?"

As he spoke, the wooden hairpin in Cheng Qian's hair was split in two by the wind from his sword. A large part of his hair immediately came loose.

The rogue cultivator, “You’d better go back to drink your milk... ugh!”

Cheng Qian caught him off guard with his counterattack then.

He jumped sideways, the tip of his foot lightly tapping the floor. And then he turned with the move ‘Tides of the Full Moon [5]’.

This was the opening move of Tide Swordplay. Just like the magnificent sounds of the seas and rivers, its footwork used long strides. The wooden sword swept by like a thousand waves, somehow giving off a strange fearsome feeling, that the rogue cultivator couldn’t help hesitating.

Two kinds of people were suitable for this kind of swordplay: The first was people who crudely fought with raw strength, who would break through any fancy techniques with one forceful blow; The other kind was people who were merciless in their ways, like Cheng Qian.

Cheng Qian trained with his sword diligently, but he had never really fought with anyone. His natural reaction was still untrained, so it was useless no matter how practiced his own swordplay was — Even though the rogue cultivator’s skill wasn’t that high, Cheng Qian was still no match for him, so he had never planned to exchange blows directly.

While watching the match, Cheng Qian had seen that this rogue cultivator’s sword techniques were packed with power, so he took a risky guess and predicted that his opponent wouldn’t change his techniques much.

He had been avoiding and dodging the attacks earlier because he only had one trick up his sleeve. He was waiting for his opponent to get carried away and push on his seeming victory, to use this technique and deliver his own blow.

The wooden sword accurately sliced through the wind from the rogue cultivator's sword. Brushing along the iron sword's edge, he cleanly avoided the sword tip. And, with the unique cultivation method of Fuyao Sect that trained the meridians through carving charms, he mercilessly struck the rogue cultivator's face.

Of course, the blunt wooden sword wouldn't cause his blood to be splattered for three feet, but the rogue cultivator was still stunned by this strike. Blood dripped from the corner of his mouth, his two lips split into three. A dark bruising mark was left on his face, which swelled to the size of a steamed bun in the blink of an eye. Nobody knew whether his teeth were knocked out.

It was said that one shouldn't hit the face when beating someone. This strike was so shocking that the bystanders were bewildered.

Even the scholar with the folding fan seemed stunned. "What a merciless little whelp."

Cheng Qian was already feeling regretful after landing his hit. It was as if he had made an even bigger mess of things.

Because of this, he showed no sign of complacency and only retracted his wooden sword with an emotionless face. The tip of his sword was pointed downward to show respect. Clasp ing his hands together, he lowered his head in apology. "I apologize for the displeasure. Many thanks for Brother's helpful pointers."

The rogue cultivator covered his own face, unable to speak. The scholar with the folding fan raised his brows, retracted the folding fan back into his palm, and commented as if deep in thought, "His venom is quite reserved too. How interesting."

When Cheng Qian lowered his eyes, he had swept a glance toward the Azure Dragon Platform. He saw some of the Protectors [6] putting their heads together in discussion. Tang WanQiu had even shown a hint of a smile. Only then did he wipe his cold sweat on the hilt of his sword, feeling like he could retreat now that he had made his point.

He let loose a breath in relief, thinking, “In the future, I’d better pick fewer fights, and displease fewer people.”

But this issue was clearly not over yet. Cheng Qian had wholeheartedly apologized, but when he turned around with his wooden sword, he heard an inhumane howl from behind.

“Little bastard, stop right there!”

And then there was a sharp hiss of the wind from behind. Cheng Qian reflexively dodged to one side, but someone in front of him was standing in his way. Cheng Qian couldn’t dodge, so he could only raise the wooden sword in his hand.

Right then, a hand forcefully caught his arm. Cheng Qian lost his balance and bumped straight into that person’s chest. The clear sound of clashing metal rang next to his ear with a silk-splitting sharpness. Cheng Qian’s pupils narrowed into slits — The defeated rogue cultivator had disregarded everything in his anger and slashed at him from behind. Cheng Qian had been pulled aside by his Eldest Shixiong.

Yan ZhengMing’s sword, which he didn’t manage to unsheathe in time, had deflected the rogue cultivator’s sword. But that rogue cultivator’s black charcoal of a brother made use of this opening to throw a piece of metal charged with his energy, directly hitting the end of Yan ZhengMing’s sword and causing it to slip in his hand. The rogue cultivator’s sword, which

should have been deflected, changed directions because of this and sliced into Yan ZhengMing's shoulder.

Cheng Qian's sight turned red instantly.

Yan ZhengMing first became enraged, but he didn't even manage to express his fury before he was beaten by the pain of his 'heavy wound' — He had originally meant to unsheathe his sword and cut down his opponent, but he didn't get to do this because it felt like the injured side of his body could no longer exert any strength.

Of course, the outsiders didn't know any of these details. In their eyes, the much too young Sect Leader Yan had only held his sword without a move, showing a steady and mature air that was rarely found in young people.

After inhaling a deep breath expressionlessly, Yan ZhengMing finally spoke, "I've gained new knowledge today."

Now that things had reached this point, Tang WanQiu finally spoke from next to the Azure Dragon Platform.

She couldn't leave the Azure Dragon Platform, so she was quite a distance away, but each of her word could be heard clearly, as if she was speaking directly next to them, "Those who have been eliminated from the Azure Dragon Competition, leave as soon as possible. Don't loiter around to create a disturbance, what kind of place do you think this is!"

Seeing that someone from the Azure Dragon Island had spoken up, the rogue cultivator brothers exchanged a look. In the end, they didn't dare to continue making a scene. After glaring at Cheng Qian and Yan ZhengMing viciously, they disappeared into the crowd and left.

Yan ZhengMing hissed lightly, released Cheng Qian, and said through gritted teeth, “Let’s go.”

Cheng Qian held onto a corner of his sleeve so tightly his fingers might puncture the fabric. In a barely audible voice, he spoke next to Yan ZhengMing’s ear, “I’m going to take their lives.”

Yan ZhengMing was surprised. He forcibly reigned in his look of pain and asked, “What did you say?”

Cheng Qian swept his reddened eyes over Yan ZhengMing’s bloody shoulder. “One day, I’m going to reduce them to ashes.”

Yan ZhengMing raised a hand to clap his back, “Nonsense... Ow, aiyo... I’ll slap you if you spew anymore nonsense!”

Cheng Qian looked at him, placed Yan ZhengMing’s arm around his own neck, and wordlessly supported him as they walked back. But his eyes still bore the beginnings of resentment — even if he spoke no more of it, he had engraved this grudge in his heart.

There was a kind of capability unique to some people with a big heart: No matter how happy or enraged they felt, as long as there was somebody else close to them who was more emotional than they were, they would be able to calm down immediately. Like Yan ZhengMing, for example. He had been almost consumed with rage earlier, but when he heard Cheng Qian’s words, he somehow felt that his fury had lessened a lot.

Li Yun hurried to help support Yan ZhengMing and released Cheng Qian’s hand. Cheng Qian silently followed them, eyes lowered and fixedly staring at the ground in front of him.

The four of them returned to their temporary dwelling on the Azure Dragon Island without a word.

“Forget it, Copper Coin,” Yan ZhengMing saw that Cheng Qian’s face seemed odd and was a little worried he would really go to kill those people, so he awkwardly tried to console him, “You were the one who’d struck his face to begin with. Nobody would be able to accept that, so don’t keep a grudge against them now.”

Li Yun never thought that he would ever hear this kind of enlightening words from his Eldest Shixiong. He immediately looked at him in shock and raised a trembling hand to feel his Eldest Shixiong’s forehead.

Cheng Qian made no sound in response.

Yan ZhengMing seemed to have noticed something. He stiffly turned half of his body around, reached out to lift Cheng Qian’s chin slightly, and said in amazement, “Aiyo, Copper Coin, you’re crying?”

Somehow, this discovery made Yan ZhengMing’s heart burst with such joy, that his wound didn’t even hurt so much anymore. One could almost see a tail rising behind him as he shamelessly said, “Could it be, you’re feeling sorry for this Shixiong of yours? Ah, out of gratitude for your filial piety, I’ll allow you to serve tea for this Sect Leader.”

Cheng Qian slapped his hand away. “Scram!”

And then he ran toward his own courtyard.

Yan ZhengMing looked around for a bit, found a black stone pillar on a nearby corridor, and told Li Yun, “Help me go over there.”

Li Yun thought that he had some kind of urgent business and hurriedly brought him to the pillar. When he saw Yan ZhengMing stare fixedly at the stone pillar, he asked in slight worry, “Why... Eldest Shixiong, is something wrong with this pillar?”

“There’s nothing wrong,” Yan ZhengMing said happily, “It’s quite clear.”

Li Yun only understood what he meant after a long while. He immediately became irritated. “A dog truly couldn’t be trained to stop eating shit [7].”

Yan ZhengMing studied his own reflection on the stone pillar’s surface. The small wound on his shoulder did nothing to impair his natural elegance. Even as an injured person, he remained charming and beautiful.

Cheng Qian’s reddened eyes had given Yan ZhengMing a peculiar feeling. It was as if a small wolf that would always ignore him all day and bite his hand for no reason had come in the dead of night to sneakily lick at the wound on his hand. It felt very tender and soothing.

In this feeling of tenderness, Sect Leader Yan, with his very small wound, was delicately helped into his room, crying out in pain all the way. Amid the Taoist children’s panicked fussing, he was treated like a delicate vase that would break with the slightest touch.

[1] ‘*a flower in the mirror, the moon reflected on the water*’ The phrase used here is . It refers to an illusory existence, something that doesn’t actually exist despite seemingly being there.

[2] *‘unwittingly jumped onto the tiger’s back’* The phrase used here is . It’s a Chinese expression that refers to a difficult dilemma, in which one couldn’t back out of a commitment once they’ve started on it. Brief explanation: When riding a tiger, one couldn’t dismount by simply jumping off because the tiger could just turn around to strike. Continuing to hold on would wear out the person and cause them to fall, which would lead to the same outcome. One can only dismount safely after killing the tiger.

[3] *‘Brother’* The phrase used here is , which is not used for blood-related brothers. Quick note: People in this sort of setting often use variations of ‘Brother’ to address strangers whose names they don’t know.

[4] *‘Think thrice before you act’* The phrase used here is . It’s a pretty self-explanatory Chinese expression, which means one must consider everything carefully before taking action.

[5] *‘Tides of the Full Moon’* The phrase used here is . It could also be translated into ‘Tides looking upon the moon’ if you treat as a verb, but as a noun means ‘full moon’.

[6] *‘Protectors’* The word used here is , which is commonly used to say ‘protector of Buddhist law’. In this setting, it’s a term for some select individuals on Azure Dragon Island including Tang WanQiu.

[7] *‘A dog truly couldn’t be trained to stop eating shit’* The phrase used here is . It basically means that bad habits couldn’t be changed so easily.

(T/N: As of this chapter, the translation will use the original Chinese versions of their nicknames (i.e. 'Tong Qian' instead of 'Copper Coin' for Cheng Qian, and 'Shuikeng' instead of 'Puddle' for Han Tan.)

After making a scene at the Azure Dragon Platform, Yan Zhengming didn't even need to say anything for everyone in the Fuyao Sect, including the Daoist children, to lessen the time they spent outside. They had all taught themselves what 'restraint' was.

Cheng Qian added two hours to his daily sword training and regularly had combat practice with his martial brothers. Before they knew it, the hundred days of the Celestial Market had come to an end. Cheng Qian had fully mastered the form of 'Seek and Pursue'.

Under such a high-pressure situation, even the originally ignorant and incompetent Han Yuan had learned to make some effort. One day, after waking up from an afternoon nap and playing with some puzzle rings [1], Li Yun had acquired his energy feel. Nobody could say for sure how he had entered the Dao. Their master was no longer there, so the Eldest Shixiong had to guide Li Yun's first time carving charms.

On the last day of the Celestial Market, Han Yuan changed into an inconspicuous set of worn-out clothes, went out for a while, and only returned at nightfall. When he came back, he had a bag of snacks in his

arms, which he ate while walking. Shuikeng, who was playing in the courtyard then, was so affected by the food in his hands that she kept following him around, salivating all the way.

“You can’t, Little Shimei,” Han Yuan said irresponsibly, “People say that children can’t eat food for adults, you’ll choke to death.”

Shuikeng’s milk teeth could cleave through wood, so she didn’t believe his exaggerated words. When she saw that the bag of snacks was almost empty, Shuikeng squeezed out her first words in desperation, “S... S... Sihong [2]!”

Han Yuan paused and said in surprise, “Wow, you can speak already?”

When she saw this opening, Shuikeng immediately clenched her fists, face turning red, and struggled hard to squeeze out once more, “Sihong!”

“How nice.” Han Yuan praised her insincerely without any other acknowledgement, and continued walking forward — He had been a beggar for so long that he’d become extremely good at guarding his food. Nobody could touch the food in his possession.

Shuikeng panicked and completely forgot her Shixiong’s repeated warnings to not fly recklessly. Her increasingly developed wings sprouted from her back as she chased after Han Yuan.

Coincidentally, Cheng Qian and Li Yun walked in from outside then.

When he saw those familiar large wings, Cheng Qian’s face immediately darkened. He exclaimed, “Come down here!”

Shuikeng was scared of Cheng Qian, because her attempts to curry favor worked on all the other Shixiong, but never produced any result with the Third Shixiong. The Third Shixiong was strict toward others and even more so toward himself, so he would never go back on his own words. Fearing that she might not get any food for dinner, she immediately dropped down and sat on the ground. She pursed her lips, because she didn't dare to cry in front of Cheng Qian.

Cheng Qian had a basket of flowers in his hand, a few books held in his other. He glared at Shuikeng with a dark face, heart filled with worry.

She was just a small Heavenly *Yao* [3] with no self-preservation skill. If she were to catch the eyes of ill-intentioned cultivators, what would become of her?

And if anything were to happen for real, nobody could defend her. She wasn't human after all. In the eyes of many cultivators, anything that wasn't human would be an object. Even if she was the daughter of the *Yao* Queen, a half-*yao*, she was still no different from those pets kept in captivity.

Seeing Cheng Qian about to scold Shuikeng again, Li Yun immediately cut in, "Let her be, Xiao-Qian. She won't understand at this age. Instead of expecting her to always remember, we should figure out a way to prevent her from flying."

"I found a charm that could seal the blood of a *yao* a few days ago," Cheng Qian said, "but I don't know whether I could successfully create it."

Even though Li Yun had only started studying the art of charms, his understanding of its depth and complexity was even more profound than Cheng Qian. He immediately said, "You'd better not carelessly try to make those charms that you've never seen again."

Cheng Qian gave no definite answer and turned the topic toward Han Yuan with a smile, “Where did you go today?”

“Gathering information,” Han Yuan’s words were muddled by the food in his mouth, “I’ve dug up everything we need to know in the past few days. The charcoal-like man who had caused trouble for us was named Zhang Dasen, he has been allowed to enter the Lecture Hall. The swordsman was called Zhang Erlin, his blood-related brother. He has been eliminated, so after the Celestial Market ends tomorrow, he has to leave the Azure Dragon Island. I also found that since these rogue cultivators have no sect, they would group together by themselves. Zhang Dasen has gathered himself a group, we have to be careful in the future.”

Han Yuan had a skill that could be considered his strongest point: In any corner of the street or any hidden alley, if any word or rumor had been spoken out there, he would be able to dig it up.

Li Yun asked, “Then who was the person with the fan?”

Han Yuan’s face darkened, “We can’t provoke that one. He’s a part of the Azure Dragon Island, named Zhou Hanzheng. He’s the Left Protector of the Lecture Hall. The Lecture Hall has two Protectors. Do you remember the woman with the very square face? She’s the Right Protector.”

He meant Tang Wanqiu.

Li Yun frowned. “That Left Protector doesn’t even know us, why does he hold such a great grudge against us?”

“Probably dissatisfied that we got in the Lecture Hall without going through the competition,” Han Yuan said, “I don’t know. I heard that he’s very malicious and quite temperamental, so we’d better not provoke him in the future — Oh right, I found something good today.”

As he spoke, Han Yuan patted off some snack crumbs from his hand and pulled out a small package wrapped with oil paper, which he showed to his Shixiong with a mysterious air.

Wrapped in the paper were three strangely shaped needles. There were barely visible charms carved on its end and its tip was slightly blue.

“This is...” Li Yun’s eyes turned serious, “Xiao-Qian, don’t touch it! These are Soul-Searching Needles, they’re poisonous... Where did you get these?”

Han Yuan grinned, “Got it from the Celestial Market, hehe.”

“I know these things, they’re really formidable,” Li Yun completely forgot about scolding Han Yuan’s classless act as he held the needles through the paper wrapping, “These are really hard to come by. They’re called the ‘Soul-Searching Needles’ because you just need to specify your target for them to kill your enemy on their own. With these, you can even claim the head of an army general amid hundreds of thousands of men with no difficulty!”

Cheng Qian had no interest in this kind of heretical practice. Even if he really wanted to reduce anyone to ashes, he would do it with his own hands. He didn’t even care to listen to their explanation, so he walked right past Li Yun and Han Yuan. With the large basket of flowers in his hand, he kicked Yan Zhengming’s door open.

In the midst of the servant girls’ giggling, he roughly placed the basket on the table and snapped, “The broken flowers and withered willows [4] you wanted.”

At that moment, he was surrounded by servant girls inside the room and the scenery outside was quite beautiful. But their Eldest Shixiong, who had

needed three months to recover from a wound that was only one and a half *cun* [5] long, was surprisingly not lazing around. There was a long piece of wood on the small table he normally used for his *guqin*, a burin held in his hand as he focused on carving the charm.

When Cheng Qian kicked the door open, the line under Yan Zhengming's hand instantly broke. The burin pricked out a drop of blood from his finger.

Yan Zhengming frowned at first, but when he saw that it was Cheng Qian, he regained his smile — For this 'severe injury', not only was Cheng Qian sent out to be a flower thief during the day, he also had to endure his Eldest Shixiong's pickiness in the evening and arrange those ridiculous flowers into the flower vase himself.

The second day, the Lecture Hall was opened.

What they called the 'Lecture Hall' was actually a mountain slope. It was so crowded that wherever you looked, you would see all sorts of people, men and women, young and old, some of them standing, some sitting, some even climbing onto trees — there was barely any place to set foot.

Fortunately, the Fuyao group had arrived earlier under Li Yun's suggestion. They had found an inconspicuous corner near the front and settled down there.

Everywhere around them were rowdy rogue cultivators. Most of them weren't of very high degree in their cultivation, far from reaching the level of inedia or rejecting worldly desires. Some of them spent their time wandering from place to place and had no standards for living, so their bodies were covered in dirt and grime, the overwhelming aroma reaching far and wide. Some of them also brought all sorts of spirit pets. Dogs, birds, and foxes were still normal, but there was a large, fat grey rat scampering about among the people. It was extremely disgusting.

In this place of rich natural resources [6], not even Cheng Qian could refrain from frowning, much less their mysophobic Eldest Shixiong.

But Yan Zhengming showed no sign of protest — He couldn't. He was the one who had decided to stay, how could he go back on his own words under everyone's eyes?

Yan Zhengming waved his hand to decline the sitting cushion offered by a Daoist child. His eyes gazed at some place in the distance, an unspeakable loneliness in his heart.

He involuntarily thought back to the Mission Hall on Fuyao Mountain, the small courtyard with its pavilion, with coiling smoke from fragrant incense, the Daoist children quietly offering snacks and perfectly warm tea. But they had never cherished those times, always causing trouble all day.

Back then, he'd always sleep until the sun was high in the sky. Li Yun would always be playing around with his disgusting reptiles, Han Yuan would always be eating sneakily. Cheng Qian was the only one who would fight his drowsiness to listen to their master's sutra chanting...

Now, the scenery remains the same, but the people are no more.

“Hey, Little Shixiong, what's wrong?” Han Yuan's voice pulled Yan Zhengming out of his thoughts.

Yan Zhengming turned around and saw Cheng Qian practically leaning on Li Yun for support. Judging from his complexion, it didn't quite seem like he hadn't slept well, it felt more like he was severely ill. Even his lips were ashen.

Cheng Qian squinted his eyes and shook his head. Either because he had no energy or he didn't want to speak too much, he said nothing.

Yan Zhengming was alarmed. The last time he saw Cheng Qian look like this was the brat's first time carving charms, when he had almost drained himself dry.

"What did you do last night?" Yan Zhengming reached out to poke at the dark circles under his eyes, "Some kind of mischief?"

Li Yun abruptly recalled his conversation with Cheng Qian the previous day. He turned to question him, "Before leaving this morning, I went to see our Shimei. I saw her crying in her room, what happened?"

Shuikeng's crying was almost guaranteed to collapse buildings. Because of this, after she began to understand her surroundings, she didn't usually cry in her room. Occasionally, she would cry for a bit, but as soon as the house began to quake, she would shut up.

The half-dead Cheng Qian finally gave some response, "The house was fine?"

"You did something like this again," Li Yun snapped, picking Cheng Qian up by his collar, "You went to carve charms by yourself again. Do you want to die so badly?"

"Shh —" Han Yuan tugged at Li Yun. The bustling mountain slope had suddenly fallen quiet. At the very center of the Lecture Hall, a person descended from the sky. The wild flowers on the mountain slope burst to life and bloomed one after another, as if they had received some kind of heavenly dew.

The person on the raised platform was Zhou Hanzheng.

While holding his Sansi Fan [7], Zhou Hanzheng cupped his fist with his other hand in greeting toward everyone. "I've made everyone wait."

Yan Zhengming reached out to pull Cheng Qian toward himself. He then helplessly spoke in a low voice to Li Yun and Han Yuan, “To think that it was him. If I had known, I wouldn’t have come here... Listen well. Today, we come early and leave early. Don’t attract anyone’s attention, hear me?”

Li Yun said nothing, face paling slightly. Han Yuan clenched his teeth, his anger and indignance clearly visible.

Yan Zhengming pretended not to notice his Shidi’s reactions. He felt Cheng Qian limply leaning onto him, his breathing extremely weak.

He didn’t ask for clarification, but Li Yun’s few words were enough for him to figure out that in order to hide the *yao* aura on Shuikeng’s body, Cheng Qian must’ve done something dangerous again.

“Ah, how worrisome.” Yan Zhengming thought this and pinched Cheng Qian to vent his anger.

On the platform, Zhou Hanzheng had begun talking animatedly, about how the Lecture Hall opens once in ten days, how everyone should train themselves the rest of the time, and the like.

“Our Azure Dragon Island doesn’t forbid disciples from engaging in friendly competition to learn from each other, but everyone must remember to respect each other’s boundaries. Do not disrupt the harmony, or inflict permanent damage on others, else severe punishment will be carried out on you.” As he spoke, Zhou Hanzheng lowered his head to meaningfully sweep his eyes over the crowd. Somehow, his eyes managed to find the group from Fuyao Sect and paused on Yan Zhengming. Zhou Hanzheng smiled, “Alright. Today, I will talk about how to absorb Qi into the body and store it in your *dantian* [8].”

“We should just leave,” Yan Zhengming absently thought while listening half-heartedly, “Even if we don’t go home, we have to go back to Fuyao Mountain. We have our Library, even if we had to figure everything out by ourselves, it would still be better than spending our days like cowards here — In the worst case scenario, we could just seclude ourselves like our Shizu [9]. We’ll go back and pack up today!”

Right then, Zhou Hanzheng suddenly said, “I know that everyone’s cultivation progress isn’t the same. How about this, I’ll invite someone to come up here for a demonstration.”

As he spoke, his slanted eyes swept toward the Fuyao Sect’s group again, malicious intent barely hidden. His eyes met Yan Zhengming’s. Yan Zhengming felt like a venomous snake had latched onto him.

“Ah, Sect Leader Yan,” Zhou Hanzheng smiled, “I heard from the Island Lord that your sect has quite a bit of history. The teachings of your sect are broad and profound, Sect Leader Yan must’ve learned to absorb Qi into your body long ago. Why don’t you come up here for some demonstration?”

Cheng Qian hadn’t gotten any sleep the previous night. He had also used up his energy to carve that charm, so his entire body was powerless at the moment. It felt like there were numerous clamps on his temples, pressing in so hard that his ears were ringing. He had already exerted his utmost efforts while walking to the Lecture Hall. If he had any inkling of finickiness in him, he might not have climbed out of his bed that morning. But the moment he heard these words, his body immediately went taut, about to stand up.

His minute struggle surprised Yan Zhengming, who was already in a stressful situation. Despite his efforts to steer away from conflict, trouble always managed to find its way to him.

Yan Zhengming pressed Cheng Qian back and said gruffly, “Be good and sit there, little brat. Don’t cause any trouble. Who asked for you to come forward?”

Afterward, he inhaled deeply and walked up there, sword in hand. With each step, his determination to leave was strengthened further. He stopped exactly ten steps from Zhou Hanzheng, held his sword vertically on the ground, and said, “I’d appreciate Zhenren’s teachings.”

Yan Zhengming’s sword was truly eye-catching. Even disregarding the sword’s quality, the scabbard by itself was extremely valuable, its surface fully adorned by all sorts of gemstones. Not even the Empress’s phoenix coronet had been decorated with so much jewelry.

Zhou Hanzheng sized him up for a moment and said, “Every present person who could absorb Qi into their body should know, that the first experience of energy feel was a matter of fateful encounter. Might I inquire, through what means did Sect Leader Yan enter the Dao?”

At that moment, Yan Zhengming was considering whether to tell the Lord of Azure Dragon Island about their departure. He understood that the Island Lord had helped them find the people of their sect and provided shelter for them, so they owed him very much. But he had experienced all sorts of grievances never known before on Azure Dragon Island, that Yan Zhengming couldn’t help harboring some feelings of anger and resentment toward the Island Lord.

Hearing the question, he didn’t want to speak more than necessary and only answered simply, “Sword.”

Zhou Hanzheng nodded with a smile. “That’s right, I’d guessed as much. It is evident how much Sect Leader Yan loved and cherished his sword.”

When these words were spoken, even the words ‘Sect Leader Yan’ had carried obvious mockery. Some of the audience was only there to watch, while some others were intentionally trying to curry favor with the Left Protector and instantly burst into laughter.

A vein popped on Cheng Qian’s forehead. Li Yun knew that he wouldn’t be able to hold back, so he instantly pinned him down the moment he saw Cheng Qian move. He warned in a low voice, “Stirring up trouble again?”

Cheng Qian’s knuckles turned white. Everyone had a limit to their tolerance. It might seem unreasonable to others, but for the person in question, they wouldn’t be able to tolerate it no matter what. If they had insulted Cheng Qian, he would consider the bigger picture and might not want to clash with others so openly, so he would endure it in silence.

But if they had insulted his master and martial brothers, he wouldn’t be able to tolerate it no matter what.

Li Yun’s hand forcibly pressed down on Cheng Qian’s shoulder as he spoke into his ear, “Don’t make a scene. Eldest Shixiong probably wants to go back already.”

Cheng Qian paused.

Li Yun whispered, “Xiao-Qian, think about it. If you can’t endure it, how can our Eldest Shixiong put up with it? He probably had wanted to go back the moment he saw this mountain slope of a Lecture Hall.”

Zhou Hanzheng first left Yan Zhengming aside as he animatedly talked about various ways to absorb Qi into the body. After laying everything out, he said, “Absorbing Qi into the body is the first step to communicating with the heaven and the earth. Successfully passing this stage means you have officially begun cultivating. The next thing to learn is the method of

cultivation. As for what the cultivation method is, each sect has its own unique technique, but they are mostly quite similar in practice with minor differences here and there. All methods would teach everyone how to absorb the essence of the heaven and the earth into your own body to build your cultivation base.”

“In order to be considered a person of great skill, other than having remarkable swordsmanship, one must also possess a solid and steady cultivation base.” Zhou Hanzheng turned to Yan Zhengming and asked, “Might I inquire, how long has Sect Leader Yan learned to absorb Qi?”

Yan Zhengming was silent for a moment.

The Fuyao Sect never paid much attention to cultivation methods. The first thing the disciples learned after entering the sect was endlessly carving charms to train the meridians. Occasionally, they might go into meditation or experience enlightenment, but Muchun Zhenren never made them meditate to form their cultivation base like other sects.

Zhou Hanzheng seemed convinced that Yan Zhengming was a useless disciple who wouldn’t train seriously. He pressed on with a grin, “Sect Leader Yan, what is it?”

Yan Zhengming, “... Three years.”

Zhou Hanzheng clapped his hands and smiled, “Having absorbed Qi into your body for three years, you must have gained quite a bit of skill. Allow us some insight.”

The moment he finished speaking, a strange wind was kicked up on the platform, coiling toward Yan Zhengming. Yan Zhengming reflexively held his sword in front of himself, gathered his Qi around his body, and formed a protective shield.

To the watching audience, Zhou Hanzheng said calmly, “This technique is called River of Rockery [10], which was developed by our sect to test the disciples’ cultivation skill. I’m sure some of you have seen this in the Azure Dragon Competition. This form is called Flying Sands and Hurling Rocks [11] and is aimed toward disciples who are just entering the sect. For those who have been cultivating for three years, the diligent or talented ones could withstand this for days. Those who are inferior by one level could withstand it for a few hours, and the next ones could withstand it for one hour or so. As for...”

Yan Zhengming could only hear the ringing in his ears — He had never really trained his cultivation base, so he didn’t know how to regulate his Qi. Soon enough, he lost sensation in his limbs. Before Zhou Hanzheng could finish speaking, the protective barrier around his body had shattered. A powerful, unwithstandable force rammed straight into Yan Zhengming’s chest, followed closely by whip-like whirlwind lashing at his body. His weight was lifted off his feet, and the next moment, he was thrown off the raised platform.

Zhou Hanzheng indifferently looked at Yan Zhengming and continued speaking in a leisurely manner, “As for those whose natural endowments were too poor, who’d resorted to taking medicines to improve their cultivation — Since they had entered the Dao through ‘taking medicines’, I’d originally expected them to last for the time needed to finish a cup of tea or to burn an incense stick, but I seem to have overestimated... Sect Leader Yan of ‘Fuyao Sect [12]’, are you alright?”

[1] ‘*puzzle rings*’ This is , nine interlinked rings used in a traditional Chinese puzzle game. For more information, you can check [this link](#).

[2] ‘*Sihong*’ What Shuikeng said here is . She was probably trying to say Shixiong.

[3] ‘*Yao*’ The word used here is . BlobT translated this into ‘monster’ but that’s not exactly it, so I used the original Chinese word.

[4] ‘*broken flowers and withered willows*’ The phrase used here is . It could also be an expression for ‘women who have lost their honor; faded beauty; fallen woman’.

[5] ‘*cun*’ The word used here is . It’s a traditional unit of length, equal to 0.1 *chi* and equivalent to 3.333 centimeters.

[6] ‘*place of rich natural resources*’ The phrase used here is , which literally means ‘place with good fengshui’. (Note: This phrase is used sarcastically)

[7] ‘*Sansi Fan*’ The phrase used here is . This is Zhou Hanzheng’s weapon and folding fan. The ‘Sansi’ came from the words that were written on the fan, (Think thrice before you act), as explained in Chapter 34.

[8] ‘*dantian*’ The word used here is . It’s an acupuncture point about three finger-widths below and two finger widths behind the navel. This is where one’s qi resides.

[9] ‘*Shizu*’ The word used here is . Here, it’s used to refer to their Shifu’s Shifu, or their Martial Grandfather, I suppose.

[10] ‘*River of Rockery*’ The phrase used here is . Depending on how you parse the phrase, the meaning could be different. If you parse it as , it would mean ‘False Mountain and River’, but if you parse it as , it would mean ‘River of Rockery’.

[11] ‘*Flying Sands and Hurling Rocks*’ The phrase used here is . It’s used to describe the condition in a windstorm.

[12] ‘*Fuyao Sect*’ The phrase used here is . literally means ‘to take medicine’ and is also written as ‘Fuyao’ in Pinyin.

Here are the Chinese names of the new characters in this chapter:

Zhang DaSen:

Zhang ErLin:

Zhou HanZheng:

It felt like Yan Zhengming's bones had been thoroughly shattered. For a moment, he lost all sensation in his body and could only see Zhou Hanzheng's eyes looking down on him, as if Yan Zhengming was only an ant amid a pile of dirt in his eyes.

Quite a few people ran up to him. Maybe they were his Shidi, or the Daoist children of his own sect. They scrambled to help him up, but Yan Zhengming couldn't muster up any strength in his legs.

Yan Zhengming wasn't sure if he had lost consciousness. It felt like he was in a trance of sorts. In the midst of it, he seemed to have heard his master's voice, "Zhengming, you were born into a wealthy family, so you don't know the hardships of the mortal world and have never encountered unfavorable circumstances. For a cultivator, this isn't a fortunate thing. Today, this master shall grant you the words 'polish and refine [1]' as your precept."

That was eight... no, almost nine years ago. He had just entered the Fuyao Sect, and was receiving the lecture for his initiation.

Yan Zhengming had never liked studying nor practicing martial arts, so he didn't understand those words at that time. He asked, "What does that mean, Master, what should I polish?"

Muchun Zhenren said, "Be it jade or stone, in the beginning, they were no different from the sand and pebbles on the road. As the years passed, they went through all sorts of trials, like blazing fire or merciless tempering, and

began to take form. Hidden in the water among mountains, their worth would be undiscovered. Only after polishing off the outer layer and going through much refining could they become useful. Zhengming, you are our Fuyao Sect's very first disciple. From now on, if you were to experience any misfortune, you must wield that hardship as your blade, and use it to refine yourself like a jade."

That's right, back then, he had also asked what 'very first disciple' meant.

Master's answer was, "'Very first' means the beginning of the inheritance and imparting of a lineage. You are the first person of our Fuyao Sect, unmatched by any in history [2]."

The taste of blood rose in his throat. Yan Zhengming scrambled to push away the hand in front of him and vomited a mouthful of blood. He did not want to know what kind of sorry state he was in at the moment. Burning pain made his face and head throb. When he reached up to touch his face, he felt blood mixed with dirt on the side of his face and forehead. His white clothes had long since become unrecognizable, one side of his waistband unraveled and dirtied with mud.

Yan Zhengming heard Zhou Hanzheng's voice from some distance away, "After completing your beginning steps on our Azure Dragon Island, some of you might wish to start your own sect in the future to spread your teachings and take disciples. If that were to happen, I must give everyone some advice: Now is the time for hard work. For a sect, having a good name is no guarantee to achieve success."

The arm Yan Zhengming was using to support his weight couldn't stop shaking. Fury and shame filled his chest, like water and earth mixing to form a swamp, drowning his entire person inside. From it, came a sorrowful feeling that was much deeper than resentment and self-reproach.

“Eldest Shixiong, what’s wrong? Say something, Eldest Shixiong!” Li Yun forcefully shook his shoulder.

At last, Yan Zhengming’s eyes began to refocus gradually. In a daze, he looked at Li Yun, Cheng Qian, and Han Yuan, and thought, “Master was wrong. What kind of jade am I? I can’t even be considered a solid rock, I’m just a pile of mud.”

Master must’ve lost his senses with old age. Why else would he make Yan Zhengming the next Sect Leader?

The words ‘Fuyao’ were like two great mountains pressing down on Yan Zhengming’s shoulder. But his body and spirit had been exhausted, so he couldn’t muster any power to support these great mountains.

“I...” He opened his mouth to speak, but his tongue seemed to have been weighed down by the bitterness in his chest, so he couldn’t even form a complete sentence.

Right then, Cheng Qian spoke up.

Cheng Qian asked, “When are we going back?”

The moment these words were spoken, the group turned speechless.

Yan Zhengming might have wanted to flee in the face of this challenge. Han Yuan and Li Yun might not have much determination to stay. Any of them could have said these words, but they shouldn’t have been spoken by Cheng Qian.

Their Third Shidi had always been the odd one out on Fuyao Mountain. His dedication to cultivating was something obvious to anyone with eyes. He

would obey the commands of anyone who opened the Library for him, so why would he suggest leaving...

Han Yuan asked in a soft voice, “Little Shixiong, what are you saying? Go back where?”

“Back to Fuyao Mountain,” Cheng Qian said coldly, “We’ll help the Eldest Shixiong back first. Other than the books in the library, there is nothing else I want to bring. I can go to find a boat in a moment, give me some money first.”

As he spoke, he didn’t hesitate at all and went to Yan Zhengming’s other side, helped him up together with Li Yun, and led the group out of the crowd.

“Wait, Xiao-Qian, listen to me!” Li Yun kept his voice down as he spoke, “In his lecture, he’s going to mention many important keys to cultivating. You’re not going to listen?”

“No, you all can listen,” Cheng Qian’s face remained emotionless, “I’m leaving, I don’t care.”

Han Yuan and Li Yun wouldn’t stay behind by themselves, of course. At the moment, an incense stick couldn’t have finished burning since the beginning of the lecture — Their departure was bound to draw people’s attention. Even Zhou Hanzheng’s eyes were fixed on them, so Li Yun had no choice but to turn around and face Zhou Hanzheng, who was still on the platform, “May the Left Protector pardon this slight, but our Sect Leader is feeling a bit unwell...”

Zhou Hanzheng made a show of moving his fan and spoke with a jeering tone, “Oh, then may your Sect Leader take good care of himself.”

After that, Zhou Hanzheng's eyes swept toward Cheng Qian, whose back was turned to him. He dragged out his words as he spoke slowly, "That boy... Hmm, the boy who struck a man's face with the wooden sword. You aren't very noteworthy, but your swordplay was quite interesting. If you want to improve further, you are welcome to train under my tutelage. If you could pass the test, you might find a place to properly train with your sword."

Cheng Qian's footsteps never faltered as he helped Yan Zhengming leave, as if he'd heard none of those words.

Han Yuan studied the foul look on Cheng Qian's face, at a loss. He didn't know if Cheng Qian really didn't hear those words, so he whispered, "Little Shixiong, that Zhou guy..."

Cheng Qian ground out his first swear words through clenched teeth, "To hell with his bullshit."

Han Yuan could only close his mouth without another word and follow his Shixiong closely.

Half of the people on the mountain slope were looking at them. Their eyes were mocking and derisive, as if they were looking at a bunch of pitiful stray dogs.

Young men have no fear for the heavens or the earth, but they were afraid of being looked down on. In this regard, all of them were the same.

Li Yun abruptly turned his face away, roughly wiping off the tears in his eyes.

Right when they were about to leave the Lecture Hall's mountain slope, they suddenly heard a loud exclamation from behind, "Stop!"

A figure appeared and stood right in their way. It was the indigent cultivator Tang Wanqiu.

When she fought the evil lord Jiang Peng against overwhelming odds on the East Sea, Cheng Qian had been greatly helped by her actions. He had thought that if they were to stay on the Azure Dragon Island, he would definitely make time to pay a visit to this Tang Zhenren, who always does things her own way. Except he hadn't expected the Azure Dragon Island to be such a terrible place to stay on.

At the moment, his heart was filled with such rage that he couldn't even muster up any amiable feelings for Tang Wanqiu. Seeing her blocking their way, Cheng Qian removed Yan Zhengming's sword from his waist and held it horizontally in front of himself. He spoke without regard for politeness, "What insight does Tang Zhenren have for us?"

Tang Wanqiu said bluntly, "Is the Lecture Hall a marketplace that you can enter and leave as you please?"

On the side, Li Yun forcefully suppressed the anger in his heart. He clenched his fist at the side of his body, pressed his tongue against the roof of his mouth, and struggled to speak in a calm voice, "We have explained ourselves to Left Protector Zhou, and are going to send our Sect Leader back..."

Tang Wanqiu cut him off, "Was that blow earlier enough to cripple him, that he needs so many people to carry him back? Should I summon an eight-lift palanquin [3] for you too?"

Li Yun, "We..."

Cheng Qian abruptly came forward. At the moment, he had little to no fear for anything. Under Li Yun's alarmed eyes, he spoke to Tang Wanqiu

rudely, “Step aside!”

Tang Wanqiu’s eyes swept past Yan Zhengming and fell on Cheng Qian. She laughed coldly, “So you’ve been shamed into anger... Oh, I get it. You’re going to flee from the island, aren’t you? Bunch of good-for-nothings.”

Cheng Qian’s fingers moved upward on the sword.

Tang Wanqiu didn’t seem to understand the phrase ‘stop while you can’ and continued mercilessly, “What, were my words not the truth? Do you have any shred of shame to feel that you’ve been humiliated?”

Cheng Qian brazenly drew Yan Zhengming’s sword and tossed aside the invaluable scabbard. Ignoring his martial brothers’ calls from behind, he charged forward without a care for consequences.

For the past half of a year, Cheng Qian had spent ten hours a day to practice with his sword. Even if his progress wasn’t rapid, at least he could infuse his Qi into his swordplay now. But he normally used a wooden sword, so the power he could exert was limited. This was his first time using a real sword. When he struck with a move from ‘The Roc’s Long Flight’, ‘Journey of a Youth’, there was a merciless killing intent within it.

Tang Wanqiu, “Good strike!”

She didn’t even draw her sword, only answering to the attack with her sword’s scabbard. Before the sword’s edge could cut in, the sword aura from both sides had collided, the difference in their skills immediately apparent. Cheng Qian’s wrists turned numb, a small cut appearing in the web between his thumb and forefinger, but he didn’t drop his sword, instead changing moves and responding to the attack.

This was a dynamic move from ‘Seek and Pursue’, ‘Cycle of Repeat’.

The sound of metal meeting stone rang again. Tang Wanqiu turned her wrist, flipping her scabbard in the air, and accurately suppressed Cheng Qian’s reckless onslaught of attacks. The dominating power of the Right Protector directly forced Cheng Qian to fall on one knee.

Li Yun, “Stop! Xiao-Qian — Eldest Shixiong, make Xiao-Qian stop!”

There was no trace of color of Yan Zhengming’s lips. It felt like his mind had gone to a far-off land. A voice was frantically clamoring in his heart, *You’re letting a little kid stand up for you! What use is it for you to be the Sect Leader? What use is it for you to be alive?*

But his body seemed to have been frozen, unable to move an inch.

The riches of the mortal world were like floating clouds, coming and going without a trace. After stripping off the gilded exterior, Yan Zhengming felt like the vital parts of his chest and abdomen had been peeled open, exposing his rotten insides under the heavens.

Tang Wanqiu wasn’t angered and laughed instead, “What, you still want to exchange blows with me? Didn’t your seniors back home ever teach you how to write the words ‘overestimating yourself’?”

The hair on Cheng Qian’s temples had been drenched by sweat. He abruptly let out a frustrated roar and strained to turn his sword to a certain angle. The youth’s still developing bone let out a crack, but he didn’t seem to feel any pain and pressed the sword upward, aiming for Tang Wanqiu.

The third form of Fuyao Wooden Swordplay, ‘Backfire’. This move was called ‘Do or Die’.

Tang Wanqiu's eyes narrowed. She drew her sword with a sharp sound. Light from the sword flashed for an instance, her action rapid and smooth, and Cheng Qian was flung out beyond two *zhang* [4].

She snorted coldly and sheathed her sword. "Even if you train without losing focus, you'd need to persist for at least a hundred and eighty years before you can be a match for me. But that day would probably never come. Someone like you, who trembles in fear before even starting..."

"I'm not afraid of you, Tang Wanqiu." With his sword pointed at the ground, Cheng Qian struggled to get back to his feet. He turned his head to wipe the blood at the corner of his lips and spoke those words in a hoarse voice.

He believed that when he was alone, he could do anything all by himself.

For a lone person, when he reaches the peak of his achievement, he's still alone; when he falls to the depths of the abyss, too, he's still alone. Even if his head were to fall from his shoulders, wouldn't that just be a scar on his body? What was there to fear?

But somewhere along the way, he'd gained so many weaknesses. If any of them were touched, he would be in so much pain he'd rather die, so much that he would give in against his own will.

Cheng Qian glared at the person in front of him and said in a low voice, "I'm not afraid of you... I'm not afraid of anyone."

Many times he tried to get back to his own feet, but he always fell back down. His still slender body trembled under his large robes, but there was no trace of fear in his actions.

Yan Zhengming was so shaken his eyes went blurry.

He suddenly let out a loud roar, violently shook Li Yun's hand off, and went to hug Cheng Qian.

Are you a useless pile of mud? It felt like a knife was repeatedly driven into Yan Zhengming's chest as he asked himself, *Are you going to let the Fuyao Sect turn into a pitiful sect that could only hide in the mountains? Are you going to bring shame to your ancestors in the depths of hell and up above the heavens? Are you going to cut off the lineage that your master had fought hard to preserve, that he'd used his last remaining breath to possess the body of a beast?*

'Unmatched by any in history'? What kind of joke was that?

Yan Zhengming struggled to breathe, his eyes bloodshot. He abruptly turned around, looked straight at Tang Wanqiu, and spoke with each word enunciated clearly, "We never said we're leaving. Even if we are, now isn't the time."

Tang Wanqiu remained still as a rock.

Yan Zhengming helped Cheng Qian up with some difficulty and walked past Tang Wanqiu.

Li Yun and Han Yuan hurried to catch up. This time, Tang Wanqiu didn't stop them. She stayed motionless, waited for them to leave, and finally gathered her disheveled long hair expressionlessly, her lone figure giving off an unkempt air.

A Daoist child of the Lecture Hall saw her from afar while patrolling and hurried to greet obsequiously, "Greetings to Tang Zhenren. Why didn't Tang Zhenren enter after arriving? Zhou Zhenren is giving a lecture."

Without even lifting her face, Tang Wanqiu mercilessly said, “The biggest shame in my life is being comrades with that person. Bah.”

After that, she turned around and went on her way domineeringly.

The way from the mountain slope of the Lecture Hall to their dwellings was so long that it seemed endless. Tang Wanqiu had still held back, so other than tearing his own hand open due to pushing himself, Cheng Qian wasn’t injured much. He was alright after recovering for a while, but he remained silent the rest of the way.

Finally, when they were about to arrive at the gates, Li Yun couldn’t help asking, “Eldest Shixiong, what should we do from now on?”

Yan Zhengming didn’t have the slightest clue in his heart. It felt like there was no end to the long path in front of them, but he didn’t want to show his helplessness in front of his Shidi, so he tried to put on the expression he usually wore and said in a seemingly carefree manner, “Who knows, we’ll figure things out as we go.”

Han Yuan was less roundabout with his words and directly asked, “Eldest Shixiong, when will we stop being looked down on by everyone?”

Yan Zhengming truly couldn’t answer this question, so he only smacked the back of Han Yuan’s head wordlessly and went back to his room with a heavy heart.

Some people are used to being weighed down by worries, so they could worry about the tiniest issue for days on end. But Yan Zhengming was someone with a big heart. He shut himself in his room, sent out his servants, and tried to make peace with his worries.

He didn't succeed. Even after the sun had set in the west, he was still distressed by his anxiety.

He knew that he should immediately go to his courtyard and practice with his sword, or pick up his burin, or maybe hurry to meditate and build his cultivation base, but no matter what... he couldn't settle down to focus on those tasks.

Yan Zhengming's heart was filled with so many thoughts he couldn't even figure out where to begin sorting them. He finally let out a long sigh and lay on his bed facing upward, blankly staring at his bed curtains, trying to empty his thoughts and figure out a way for their sect. Unfortunately, his short life had been spent too focused on outer appearances. Even if he had completely cleared out his mind, he still couldn't produce anything significant.

He sighed. With nowhere to vent his inner turmoil, he truly wished he could just throw a tantrum.

Right then, the door suddenly opened with a creak.

Yan Zhengming inhaled deeply and said in annoyance, "Zheshi, didn't I say I'm going to sleep?"

"It's me."

Yan Zhengming was surprised. He raised half his body off the bed to look. "Tong Qian, why are you here?"

Cheng Qian had a small bottle of medicine in his hand, probably for treating combat injuries — Ever since he added two hours to his daily sword training, this underlying medicinal scent had often clung to him.

“To look at your wounds,” Cheng Qian said simply.

Yan Zhengming fell silent and allowed Cheng Qian’s clumsy hands to fumble around the bruises on his body.

When Cheng Qian had gathered his own things and was wiping his hands with a piece of cloth, about to leave, Yan Zhengming suddenly spoke up, “Xiao-Qian, don’t you have anything to ask me?”

Cheng Qian hesitated before saying, “Today... When you fell from the platform, you’d called out ‘Master’...”

He didn’t seem to know how to comfort others. He fidgeted for a moment and finally patted Yan Zhengming’s shoulder experimentally.

He found that he still wasn’t one for kind words. Cheng Qian was a little frustrated by this and let out a low sigh.

Yan Zhengming, “I’m not talking about that.”

Cheng Qian looked at him in confusion. “... Then what?”

Something like the plans for the sect’s future? Or when this Sect Leader of yours could grow some backbone?

In that instance, Yan Zhengming learned the difference between Cheng Qian and the others — He never cared what kind of plans his Sect Leader had in mind, nor did he ever hope for anyone to become stronger to reduce his suffering on the Azure Dragon Island. When he had been looked down on, he added more time to his own sword training. Even if the heavens were to collapse, or if the earth were to cave, his eyes would only see the path that was laid out in front of him.

“Master had shown you the entire set of Fuyao Wooden Swordplay?” Yan Zhengming suddenly changed the topic.

Cheng Qian nodded. “But I still can’t fully grasp the last three forms.”

“Remembering is enough.” Yan Zhengming draped his outer robe on and grabbed the sword that had brought him countless grievances, “Go, to the backyard. Help me record the Fuyao Wooden Swordplay into a sword manual.”

[1] ‘*polish and refine*’ The phrase used here is . In a literal sense, it means ‘carve and polish’. In a less literal sense, it means ‘to ponder; to mull over; to think through’.

[2] ‘*unmatched by any in history*’ The phrase used here is . It means ‘to have neither predecessors nor successors’, but it sounds a bit awkward in English, so I went about it in a different way at my proofreader’s suggestion.

[3] ‘*eight-lift palanquin*’ The phrase used here is . It’s a palanquin with eight carriers, usually reserved for high officials.

[4] ‘*zhang*’ The word used here is . It’s a traditional unit of length, equal to 10 *chi* and equivalent to 3.333 meters or 3.65 yards.

For those who might be interested in the name of the sword techniques:

Journey of a Youth: (: young man; : journey, travel)

Cycle of Repeat: (to move in circles)

Do or Die: (to stake everything in a single throw; to risk everything on a single venture)

I decided to put this part separately because seeing too many translation notes might be too intimidating for some people, lololol.

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There were two mountains on the opposing sides of Azure Dragon Island. On the ridge of the back mountain, the dense forest was far away from the waves of the sea. The figure of a person made its way quickly within the forest, moving so swiftly it was like a gust of wind, and went straight for the edge of the cliff.

The tips of his feet tapped lightly on the uneven side of the crag as he made his way up, eyes set on a 'withered herb' with neither flowers nor leaves at the edge of the precipice. In a single swipe, he plucked it out cleanly with its roots. And then he did a flip in the air, fingers digging into the mountain rock. His arm went taut and swung his body onto the mountain slope.

This person's movements were so graceful and agile that there was an air of carefreeness around them. Only when he had landed did his appearance become apparent: it was a young man, about fifteen to sixteen years old. He looked back to quickly sweep his eyes over the cliff, then he turned around with a faint smile and continued on his way.

Only then did the giant eagle guarding the 'withered herb' realize that its treasure had been stolen. It immediately began screaming, its feathers all ruffled up in anger. And yet, despite its ire, the beast was very intelligent. As if knowing that it stood no chance against the perpetrator, it stayed where it was, hesitating for a moment. In the end, it didn't dare to give chase. Only a short while had passed, but the young man's figure had disappeared into the thick forest without a trace.

Suddenly, the long and loud shout of a man was heard. Startled, the giant eagle took off into the sky, away from the cliff. Other shouts rang out in response, signaling the forming of a siege in the dense forest, clearly arranged beforehand.

The birds in the forest flew straight to the sky, their cries resonating, and dispersed quickly as they fled.

When the young man heard this, his expression remained the same. He carefully patted off the soil clinging to the roots of the ‘withered herb’, tucked it into his robe, and swung the ordinary-looking wooden sword in his hand twice. He clicked his tongue. “Clingy bastards [1].”

Turns out, this young man was Cheng Qian.

Five years had passed in a heartbeat. The young child from back then had grown into a dashing young man. True to the blessing from his Eldest Shixiong, which was gifted to him on their first meeting in the Land of the Tender back then, he had not grown ugly.

In the blink of an eye, four to five people appeared from within the forest to surround Cheng Qian. Their leader did not have a pleasant appearance, his face like charcoal. It was Zhang Dasen.

Before coming to the Azure Dragon Island, Zhang Dasen had already made some progress with his cultivation base, so he had a bit of a reputation among the rogue cultivators. His weapon was a two-headed halberd. He was already quite proud to begin with, and with the good-for-nothing rogue cultivators constantly sucking up to him, he became increasingly arrogant.

“It’s you again, brat,” In the past five years, not only had Zhang Dasen’s grudge with Cheng Qian not lessened in the slightest, it had become even

deeper instead. The moment he saw Cheng Qian, he couldn't help gritting his teeth. "Hand over the thing obediently."

Cheng Qian held both hands behind his body, wooden sword hanging at his side, occasionally tapping on his leg. There was an apt amount of puzzlement on his face, as if saying 'I don't understand what the dog is yipping'.

Zhang Dasen had always been the type to put on a threatening act. If others had traded insults with him, he would feel a little more at ease. But each time he went up against Cheng Qian's complete indifference to worldly temptations, he always felt so angered he might instantly sprout a faceful of beard.

One of the men who had come with Zhang Dasen gave Cheng Qian a cold smile. "Little fellow, if you're a sensible one, hurry and hand over the 'Wupeng Herb'. If you continue to resist, we're going to drop all courtesy."

Hearing this, Cheng Qian immediately turned to him. The youth held his sword levelly, lowered his head in a respectful bow, and cupped his fist with his other hand in obeisance. "I wouldn't dare, please."

Seeing the uncooperative attitude, the men around Cheng Qian exchanged a look and immediately charged forward with perfect coordination.

When they attacked, it was easy to tell which of them were responsible for being the main attackers, supporters, sneak attackers, and which were the ones cutting off the enemy's retreat. Against this challenge, Cheng Qian remained calm and composed, displaying his great skill.

It was obvious that both parties were very familiar with this kind of one-against-many fight.

Zhang Dasen's two-headed halberd produced a powerful wind with one swing, completely locking Cheng Qian among them. Three people followed up closely, the last of them circling behind Cheng Qian. With a loud howl, his long sword came down toward Cheng Qian's spine.

Cheng Qian didn't even turn around. The wooden sword in his hand was like an agile snake — Without missing a beat, it accurately pressed down on the sneak attacker's wrist. And then, supporting his entire weight on this point, Cheng Qian leapt into the air. The sawdust his opponent had sliced from the wooden sword was agitated by this move, so it immediately dispersed in the air like broken nails.

Zhang Dasen's group hurried to back off, their coordination messed up by this action. Making use of this opening, Cheng Qian found a gap amid the three people's Qi. He raised his hand to grasp a tree branch, took a leap, and went straight up like a bird, his clothes fluttering behind him.

Zhang Dasen's men instinctively tried to give chase, but none of them were as agile as Cheng Qian was. When they had finally recomposed themselves, they realized that there was a large distance in between them and Cheng Qian.

This very brief instance was all Cheng Qian needed.

With the move 'Sentimental Wind amid Rolling Tides', there was instant clamor on the treetop, twigs and leaves creating a loud commotion. Zhang Dasen couldn't move his two-headed halberd freely in that space, so he was directly hit with the sword aura.

And then, Cheng Qian ignored the pursuit of one of the men, who had a demon-vanquishing club, and dropped from the air. He immediately took off at a high speed after landing and struck the root of a large tree at the same time.

There is a saying, ‘When the tree falls, the monkeys scatter [2]’. The ones further up who were trying to beat Cheng Qian didn’t have time to react before finding danger right overhead, so they hurried to scramble out of the way. By the time they’d fought their way out of the mess of twigs and leaves, Cheng Qian was already far away, impossible to catch up to.

In the distance, Cheng Qian brushed off a small leaf on his clothes and courteously cupped his fist with his other hand for Zhang Dasen, as if saying ‘Thank you for your hospitality, your pointers are much appreciated’. His figure quickly blended into the glow of the setting sun, disappearing without a trace.

In the past few years, the Fuyao Sect had fully settled on the Azure Dragon Island. Fortunately, the troublesome Zhou Hanzheng who kept bothering them still had to carry out his duties as the Protector, so after appearing once in the first lecture, he never came to offend their eyes again.

Of the two Main Protectors of the Lecture Hall, one was Tang Wanqiu from Mulan Mountain. Zhou Hanzheng, as the other Protector, was also not from the Azure Dragon Island. But his origins were hidden more carefully than Tang Wanqiu, so it wasn’t something that could be dug up by Han Yuan’s kind. Tang Wanqiu had rushed to arrive at the Azure Dragon Island with Yan Zhengming’s group when the Celestial Market was about to open, but Zhou Hanzheng had arrived even later than her. After the first day at the Lecture Hall, he had hurriedly left the following day.

Most of the masters who went up the platform afterward were quite reserved. They only went to give their lecture and left immediately after they finished, paying little to no attention to the audience of rogue cultivators.

Yan Zhengming had thoroughly learned his lesson from acting ostentatiously. From then on, on the days when the Lecture Hall was open,

they would go there before the sun had risen to look for an inconspicuous spot. They didn't really speak much among each other, each of them meditating, carving charms, or reading sword manuals on their own as they waited for the others to arrive. After the lecture had ended, they would silently take their leave again.

As time passed, the Fuyao Sect was finally forgotten by those who weren't involved with them. The young men had practically become unnoticeable... Oh, of course, Cheng Qian was an exception. Cheng Qian showed his face with his martial brothers in public less and less often, basically always doing things by himself.

He still wasn't strong enough, so he couldn't protect the entirety of his sect. He could only attract all the hostility others felt for the sect toward himself, carrying the burden alone.

The previous year, Yan Zhengming had sent away a large ship to return most of the Daoist children and the young maidens that had grown up, including Xiao-Yue'er, back to the Yan house. After all, they were only common people. The peaks of their youth would only last for about a decade, it wouldn't do for them to waste it here.

Only a few of them, like Xueqing and Zheshi, had chosen to stay, accompanying them for the long journey ahead.

Thus, the large crowd of Fuyao Sect had been reduced greatly, so they all decided to move to the same courtyard and truly began to cultivate peacefully.

The changing of the four seasons didn't exist on the Azure Dragon Island, so it was easy to forget how much time had passed. The people here often lost themselves, because if they let their guard down, they might lose track of how many springs had gone, how many autumns had passed out there.

In those five years, Yan Zhengming and Cheng Qian had finally transcribed all five forms of the Fuyao Wooden Swordplay through many discussions and deliberations. They passed it to Li Yun, who then passed it to Han Yuan.

Either because ‘teaching was the best way to learn’, or because Yan Zhengming’s mentality had changed, he had finally settled down and become more mature. The swordplay that he had spent eight years to learn less than three forms of back in Fuyao Mountain, he had finally mastered completely on the Azure Dragon Island.

Shuikeng had also grown from a toddler learning how to speak into a young maiden. Probably because she had encountered a great calamity even before hatching from her egg, this little girl was very cool-headed, though it was unclear whom she had taken after. As soon as she’d learned how to speak, Shuikeng never cried anymore. No matter what kind of problem she encountered, she would just calmly lay out the situation to her Shixiong and use her technique of ‘chattering endlessly’. This was a time-tested technique that had always proved to be effective. As long as she could irritate one of her Shixiong enough, she would always have her wish granted.

Because of this, her Shixiong had secretly discussed the *Yao Queen’s* mysterious lineage many times. They collectively believed that she might have been the incarnation of a myna. How else could she have produced such a talkative egg?

With the dead-looking Wupeng Herb, Cheng Qian returned to their courtyard. He had only come to stand in front of the entrance when his face contorted against his will — While he was on the tree earlier, he had been struck on the back with the demon-vanquishing club by one of Zhang Dasen’s men. He hadn’t dodged in time back then. Now, he most probably had the ‘Centipede Mark’ on his back, which caused him great pain even with the slightest move.

Cheng Qian originally wanted to turn around for a look, but with just a slight twist of his neck, his back felt like it might be split in two. He could only be grateful that he'd worn dark clothes that day, so he could keep things hidden.

After recomposing himself with some difficulty, Cheng Qian entered the courtyard, still a little tense.

Little Shuikeng was standing in the courtyard with a miserable face. Someone had drawn a circle of charms around her feet, turning the ground into a cage to keep her in place. The fine and close-knitted carving, which only used the minimum amount of strokes, were most probably the Eldest Shixiong's work — From his method of educating their Shimei, too, it was clear that the Sect Leader was strict with others but lenient on himself.

A scroll of charms was hanging on Shuikeng's neck. It was the exact same *Scriptures on Clarity and Stillness* that had made her Shixiong wish for death all those years ago. This object was truly a baneful existence for them, its influence going back to a long time ago. It was said that Han Yuan's head would hurt just by looking at it now.

“Third Shixiong!” Seeing Cheng Qian, Shuikeng looked like she had seen her lifesaver and hurried to call out, “Third Shixiong, help!”

Cheng Qian gave her a glance and walked up to her. “Is your Second Shixiong in his room?”

With her heart full of hopes, Shuikeng hurriedly nodded her head, “Yes, yes, the Second Shixiong is...”

From a building not too far away, Li Yun's voice was heard, “Why did you come back so late, what were you up to?”

Cheng Qian made a sound in response. Without a care for Shuikeng, he turned toward that building.

Shuikeng cried out, “Ah! Third Shixiong don’t go, let me out, I need to go to the latrine, I’m going to wet my pants!”

She had used this trick so many times, none of her Shixiong ever fell for it anymore. Cheng Qian shook his head. A window flew open from a distance away. Li Yun poked his head out and mercilessly rebuffed Shuikeng, “Do it, then. Clean things up yourself afterward.”

Shuikeng was practically close to tears, “No! Second Shixiong, Third Shixiong, I’m still so young, I don’t want to memorize these troublesome scriptures! You can’t treat me like this, our master up in the heavens would be heartbroken!”

Cheng Qian couldn’t move his head, so he had to turn his whole body around. He sent her a smile and cajoled her in a gentle voice, “He wouldn’t, Little Shimei. Master had treated us exactly like this back then.”

Shuikeng, “...”

Cheng Qian ignored his howling Shimei and went straight into Li Yun’s room, closing the door behind himself to keep the noise out. When he turned around, he immediately changed stances and spoke in her favor, “She’s only six or seven years old, why would you restrict her like that? The charms were that Niangniang’s doing, weren’t they? Our master had never locked him in the Mission Hall back then.”

Li Yun’s room was completely filled with all sorts of torn up paper and messed up books, spiritual herbs and charms scattered all over the place. Hearing those words, Li Yun poked his head out of the pile of trash and said, “Haven’t you realized? Our sect has no proper cultivation method, but

we learned to absorb Qi into our body at around the same time other people do. Think about it. Back then, our Eldest Shixiong only ever cared to play around, but he successfully began cultivating in three to four years. Why do you think that is?”

Cheng Qian, “It can’t have been those scriptures?”

“Don’t say that,” Li Yun procured a diagram of the meridians from some corner. There were circles and dots on them, notes left all over the place, which made Cheng Qian’s head throb just by looking. Li Yun said, “I noticed a few days ago, there might be some kind of clandestine secret in our master’s *Scriptures of Clarity and Stillness*.”

Only then did Cheng Qian realize that all these years, he’d been so disrespectful to the ‘*Scriptures of Clarity and Stillness* which hid clandestine secrets’. He immediately asked, “What secret?”

“I don’t know yet,” Li Yun said irresponsibly, “It’s something that had accumulated in our sect for thousands of years, how could it be so easy to figure out? I made Shuikeng recite it to try things out for now.”

Cheng Qian, “...”

When he looked out the window, he saw Shuikeng, who was meant to ‘try things out’, with her head lowered dejectedly in the circle of charms, lips pursed as she flipped the book of scriptures in her hand. Her figure was as pitiful as it could possibly be.

Cheng Qian sighed, “Alright, it’s not the first time you use us to ‘try things out’ anyway. She won’t lose anything just from reciting those scriptures, but... What about her *yao* aura?”

Li Yun scratched his hair in frustration. “I was about to tell you this. She’s grown bigger and bigger now, those charms might not be able to keep suppressing things for long. If we’re going to create medicines, I still need the ‘Wupeng Herb’. I’ve been searching for the past year, but still couldn’t find it. If it really can’t be helped... I’ll have to figure out a way for people to search outside the island.”

Hearing this, Cheng Qian gave him a smile.

Li Yun was confused, “What?”

Cheng Qian reached into his robe, pulled out a small paper package, and placed it on the table. The tip of the dry Wupeng Herb peeked out of the wrapping.

When Li Yun’s eyes fell on the package, he was instantly surprised. He grasped the Wupeng Herb in his hands, voice changing with his emotion, “Where did you get it? This is the main ingredient in medicines to absorb energy. If the island has it, people must’ve set their eyes on it ever since it first sprouted... Wait.”

“Nn, I snatched it away,” Cheng Qian waved it off, “Stop asking. All is good as long as it can be used. I’m leaving.”

When he finished speaking, he turned around, about to leave, but Li Yun suddenly reached out to grab his shoulder. Cheng Qian immediately suppressed his responding groan, the pain from this light contact almost making him keel over.

Li Yun was practically freaking out, “Wait! What happened?”

As Cheng Qian grew in the past few years, his ‘bad habit’ in this respect had also become more and more apparent. If he’d caught wind of anything,

he wouldn't discuss it with the others and would take care of things himself in the next few days, so he almost constantly had wounds on his body. He would only come to ask for medicines in secret, never saying anything even when he was asked. It was only because he often relied on Han Yuan to ask around for some specific information that Yan Zhengming and the others could figure out what he was doing, his reasons, and whom he had crossed.

“Nothing... Ow.” Cheng Qian bit back his pain and moved his shoulder slightly for Li Yun to see, “Maybe I'd woken on the wrong side of the bed today, plus I'd been tapped with a club for a bit. Don't tell the Niangniang, I'd rather not have him nag at me...”

It is said that one must never badmouth people during the day, and never badmouth ghosts in the evening. Before Cheng Qian even finished speaking, the door curtain of the inner room had moved slightly. With a book in his hand, Yan Zhengming emerged gracefully.

Yan Zhengming looked at him with a fake smile and asked, “Who were you talking about?”

Cheng Qian, “Ahem... Eldest Shixiong.”

Fortunately, Yan Zhengming didn't seem interested in pursuing the issue for now. He put down the old book in his hand and turned to Li Yun, “What you mentioned earlier — I was actually planning to go back to Fuyao Mountain in the near future. I'd gained some insight recently, so I wanted to look for confirmation in our ancient records. Even though the things in our Library were messy and unsorted, we should be able to find some information from the things inherited in our sect. Besides...”

He frowned slightly, “Last year, I saw that Xiao-Yue'er and the others had grown up quite a bit, so I sent the girls back. At the time, I'd asked them to deliver a letter back home, but there's still no response until now. The Azure

Dragon Island doesn't forbid sending and receiving letters. There's no wind from them after all this time, something might have happened along the way. I want to go back home and check things out."

"But you might not be allowed to leave the island so freely after entering the Lecture Hall." Li Yun muttered in a low voice, "How about this, let Xueqing or Zheshi go back in your stead. I heard Xueqing had acquired his energy feel some time ago? Won't he be able to enter the Library?"

"Not everyone with energy feel can enter the Library. Back then, Tong Qian and I had been guided by Master himself," Yan Zhengming shook his head, "Forget it, we're in no hurry to sort out our sect's cultivation method. We'll have plenty of time when we return in the future. I'll let Xueqing send a letter home and go to Fuyao Mountain to check things out for now."

As they discussed this, Cheng Qian was about to escape without their notice. But he had only reached the door when Han Yuan suddenly burst in, almost slamming the door in his face.

"Aiyo Xiao-Qian what are you doing!" He very openly announced Cheng Qian's location, followed by a very loud exclamation, "Eldest Shixiong, two great news!"

Yan Zhengming gave Cheng Qian a cutting look, stepped back with a frown, and raised his hands slightly, "Speak slowly, your spittle is spraying all over my face."

Han Yuan gave a short carefree laugh and said, "Charcoal Zhang's been beaten by someone. His face was swollen like a mantou, you can't even see his neck anymore."

Yan Zhengming and Li Yun's eyes spontaneously turned to Cheng Qian. Cheng Qian only coughed drily and pretended to look at the view outside

the window.

Han Yuan continued, “Also, a big boat had come to the port. I’d gone to look for a bit. It seems like that pretty boy named Zhou is back.”

Zhou Hanzheng?

Cheng Qian finally dropped his plans of leaving. He leaned against the door and stood silently at the sidelines, fingers subconsciously resting on his wooden sword.

“Last time he came back was when the Lecture Hall first opened, I’m guessing something important must be coming up on the island this time too,” Han Yuan said confidently, “What do you think it is?”

Each time he reported anything, he would always act like he was a storyteller. All three of his Shixiong didn’t care to indulge him, so Han Yuan could only smile in ridicule and revealed, “I heard that the Lecture Hall is going to hold a grand competition, in which the victors can enter the inner halls of the Azure Dragon Island’s disciples to train.”

[1] ‘*Clingy bastards*’ The phrase used here is . In a literal sense, this means ‘the soul of the deceased has yet to disperse’. In a less literal sense, this means ‘the influence of a doctrine still remains’. Cheng Qian is saying that Zhang Dasen and his men were like resentful spirits haunting him and refusing to leave him alone.

[2] ‘*When the tree falls, the monkeys scatter*’ The phrase used here is . It’s an idiom that means ‘When an influential person falls from power,

his supporters disperse; An opportunist abandons an unfavorable cause’.

New terms in this chapter:

Wupeng Herb: (: ‘crow; raven; black’; : ‘sail of a boat’; : ‘herb’)

Sentimental Wind amid Rolling Tides: (: ‘tide; current’; : ‘roll’; :
‘to be affectionate; to be in love’; : ‘wind’)

Cheng Qian wasn't interested in the news. He had never held any interest in pointless things like competing with others, because there was no need.

As he got older, his prideful heart had been tested with a fair deal of self-doubt and become even more steadfast as a result. Now, in Cheng Qian's eyes, there were only two kinds of people in this world: people who are no match for him now, and people who will be no match for him in the future.

Cheng Qian's back was beginning to hurt greatly, so he didn't want to loiter around. He announced simply, "I'm leaving if there's nothing else."

"Hold it, your business isn't done yet, stay right there," Yan Zhengming said before turning to Han Yuan, "Have you finished your daily assignment of thirty wooden charms?"

Han Yuan, "..."

Seeing this, Yan Zhengming raised his brow, "What does that competition have to do with you? Hurry up and go!"

Han Yuan dejectedly stuck his tongue out and didn't dare to say another word.

Their Sect Leader was no longer the person he used to be — He had grown from a little boy playing the part of a vain narcissist, into a vain narcissist who actually has authority.

Five years ago, Sect Leader Yan, who'd suffered humiliation at the Lecture Hall, had made a seemingly illogical decision without a care for public opinion — He obstinately insisted that Fuyao Sect cultivates through reciting sutras, preserving the tradition of training the meridians through carving charms. Even if they had to follow in other people's footsteps and hurry to build their cultivation base, they must still spend additional time to complete these two assignments.

Regarding this, Yan Zhengming had explained his reason with some self-deprecation, "I've grown to this age, but other than this face that my parents had birthed me with, there is nothing on my person that holds any sort of value. What right do I have to change the thousand-year tradition of our sect? In any case, even if the sect tradition makes no sense whatsoever, it's still something left behind by our master."

That last line had moved Cheng Qian, causing the only person who would go against the Sect Leader's words to change sides.

Li Yun never had much opinion to begin with, so he agreed quickly. As for Han Yuan, he didn't even have a clear viewpoint. Thus, this matter was decided just like that.

Those five years had proven that Yan Zhengming's seemingly absurd decision was correct.

After absorbing Qi into their body, forming their cultivation base wasn't a smooth process. Once a person began cultivating, they would encounter one Trial every three years. Each time, they would experience something akin to a minor heavenly tribulation, which might result in dire consequences if they weren't careful. In the best case scenario, their cultivation wouldn't improve for the next few years; in the worst case scenario, they'd experience a Qi deviation.

These were the trials that had to be endured once a common person treads the path of cultivation.

Back then, Muchun Zhenren had never urged his disciples to form their cultivation base. If he hadn't departed unexpectedly, the disciples' boring days of charms and sutras in the Mission Hall would've continued for so many years. This process was long and tedious, its results not immediately visible. But when repeated daily, their meridians would become strengthened through these continuous efforts.

It goes in line with the saying 'Sharpening the axe won't interfere with cutting firewood [1]'.

This way, when they truly began to build their cultivation base through conventional means like other people, their progress would be much faster, even if not extremely so. When encountering their Trial, too, their experience would be much better than other people's.

But with the firewood presented right in front of them, how many people in the world would be willing to keep sharpening their axe?

After telling Han Yuan off, Yan Zhengming made a gesture toward Cheng Qian, telling him to follow, and led the way out.

Shuikeng, who was originally squatting in the middle of the courtyard, immediately lit up when she saw him emerge. She stared at Yan Zhengming with eager eyes, like a bird that had been caged for a long time.

Each time Yan Zhengming saw her, he would always feel like he'd seen his own past self. It produced a strange sentiment of 'One wouldn't know the grace of one's parents before raising their own child'. With a flick of his finger, he sent out a bolt of his Qi, which accurately hit the charms under

Shuikeng's feet. An opening was torn in the flawless circle of charms, through which the Qi within leaked out, creating a small vortex right there.

After she was freed, Shuikeng plopped down on the ground, drawling out a boorish accent that she'd picked up from some unknown place as she stretched her neck, "Oh, mother, ow ow ow ow — this old body's all exhausted."

Hearing this, Yan Zhengming's footsteps halted. Shuikeng saw that things were taking a bad turn, so she hurriedly jumped to her feet, wiped her face with the small dirty hands she'd just used to pat her rear, and feigned innocence without regard for her slovenly appearance, "Hehe, thank you, Eldest Shixiong."

Her every action made Yan Zhengming's eyes twitch continuously. At last, he couldn't stand it anymore and turned to leave with a flick of his sleeves. He told Cheng Qian as he walked, "If she dared to grow up like Tang Wanqiu in the future, I'm going to kick her out of our sect no matter what."

"She won't," Cheng Qian comforted him, "She's the Yao Queen's daughter after all. I heard that the offspring of a cuckold usually wouldn't be too ugly."

Sect Leader Yan, "..."

He did not feel better in the slightest.

Yan Zhengming opened the door to his own room and jerked his chin at Cheng Qian coldly, telling him to enter. Cheng Qian hesitated at the doorway — Even though the fragrant aroma in Yan Zhengming's room had become much milder after Xiao-Yue'er left, Cheng Qian still couldn't help sneezing when the door was opened.

He rubbed his nose while looking at the flowers on the table, which always remained in bloom with the help of charms, and took a moment to admire his Sect Leader's deeply-ingrained sophistication. He secretly let out a sigh. He might not be able to get out of this one.

Zheshi rose to his feet. "Sect Leader."

"There's nothing for you to do here, you can leave." Yan Zhengming said, "When the Lecture ends tomorrow, tell Xueqing to come to my place, there's something I need him to do."

Zheshi obediently left the room. Yan Zhengming closed the door behind him, crossed his arms in front of his chest, and leaned his back against the door. To Cheng Qian, he said, "Take off your clothes."

Cheng Qian, "..."

"Hurry," Yan Zhengming said expressionlessly, "Are you waiting for me to strip you?"

Cheng Qian, "I'm not..."

Seeing his lack of cooperation, Yan Zhengming immediately took a step forward, about to make good on his words and 'carry out the law on the spot'.

Cheng Qian saw his determination to pursue the issue, so he reluctantly began to disrobe while intentionally trying to disgust Yan Zhengming, "Eldest Shixiong, I haven't bathed in three days, aren't you afraid of corrupting your eyes?"

Surprisingly, Yan Zhengming didn't take the bait. He reached out to tug off the clothes Cheng Qian kept hanging on his body and saw the bruise on Cheng Qian's back, which extended from his left shoulder to the right side of his waist. It had almost blackened, the ruptured blood vessels spreading out like spiderwebs. On the youth's pale back, it was an extremely horrifying sight.

Other than that, there were many other wounds of varying degrees on Cheng Qian's body. Some of them had deeper colors, while others seemed like they would fade out soon — absorbing Qi into the body didn't mean they could practice inedia and be free of worldly needs, but after they'd begun cultivating, their marrows and bones would be cleansed. Their bodies wouldn't blemish as easily as those of common people, and their wounds wouldn't scar either. Except if they hadn't managed to recover.

With just a glance, Yan Zhengming immediately averted his eyes. It felt like his chest had been struck mercilessly, his heart aching so much it seemed to be on the verge of breaking. Even his own back was throbbing as a result.

A strange unreasonable anger toward Cheng Qian formed inside Yan Zhengming. His chest rose and fell repeatedly as he forced himself to calm down, which took a while.

“Go lie on the bed,” Yan Zhengming said. He unsuccessfully tried to hold himself back, and added in a resentful voice, “If you had been two years younger, I would've beaten you until not even your master could recognize you, bastard.”

Cheng Qian tried to turn his neck a few times, but didn't succeed, so he obediently lay on his stomach to let his Eldest Shixiong apply medicine for him. He still tried to explain himself, “Is it bruising? They always cover large areas, but they're actually alright... Ah!”

“Alright?” Yan Zhengming’s voice turned cold.

Cheng Qian didn’t dare to anger him further, so he buried his face in the sheets and focused on enduring the pain.

The demon-vanquishing club naturally had divine murderous energy. If it weren’t for the user being so incompetent, unable to bring out even a tenth of its power, that thing could have shattered the entirety of Cheng Qian’s innards through his back.

Yan Zhengming’s cusses and berating words were right at the tip of his tongue, but when they were about to leave his mouth, he couldn’t make a single sound. After experiencing so much, Yan Zhengming’s empathy-lacking heart had finally grown back.

The current Yan Zhengming, with his fully-functional heart, knew exactly how Cheng Qian had earned each of the wounds on his body.

Now that he thought about it, any grudge or fury couldn’t have kept him going for so many years. Yan Zhengming couldn’t deny that this Shidi of his, who was the youngest out of them all, had pushed him to come to this point.

Cheng Qian had never criticized his Sect Leader about anything. His attitude had always been the same: If you can do it, do it yourself; if you can’t do it, I’ll do it for you, even if my body is ruined and my bones are shattered.

Each wound on Cheng Qian’s body was like a slap to Yan Zhengming’s face. Because of this, he didn’t dare to rest for even one moment.

In the hardest days, Yan Zhengming had been unable to close his eyes for an entire night, because he kept seeing this Shidi of his in his nightmares.

There was a soothing scent in Yan Zhengming's warm sheets, the aroma permeating into the body and limbs. These past few days, Cheng Qian had been waiting for the right timing next to the Wupeng Herb, so he was thoroughly exhausted. Not long after he'd lied down, he didn't want to move another inch.

After he finished applying medicine, Yan Zhengming saw the youth's increasingly thinning waist and couldn't help thinking, *The Sect Leader's seal hangs around my neck. Even if I'm not around, there's still Li Yun — Even Han Yuan is older than you, so why couldn't you just be like Shuikeng, and remain blissfully ignorant? Why do you have to force yourself like this? Why don't you rely on your Shixiong more?*

And yet, though he could have said these words to anyone, he couldn't say them to Cheng Qian, whose exhaustion became apparent after he had relaxed.

Because they had been relying on each other for life all these years, even saying 'thanks' was difficult for Yan Zhengming, much less enlightening words of that sort.

After some inner turmoil, Yan Zhengming only told him tersely, "Zhou Hanzheng has returned, but he won't stay for long. No matter what, you have to endure it and keep a low profile, do you hear me?"

Cheng Qian drowsily made a sound in response, clearly treating his words like the wind.

Yan Zhengming looked down and realized that the little bastard's eyes had closed. Cheng Qian's head was slightly turned to the side, his eyelashes sometimes trembling minutely. There were faint dark circles under his eyes. Even the remaining air of adolescence on him had been overpowered by his exhaustion.

Yan Zhengming sighed, gathered his medicines, and made no other sound as he undid Cheng Qian's hair, pulled his clothes up, and placed a thin blanket over his body. He went to sit and meditate on the side.

But after sitting for a while, Yan Zhengming finally couldn't help himself. It felt like he wouldn't be able to meditate peacefully if he didn't ask this important question, so he went to give Cheng Qian a solid shove, "Hey, have you really not showered for three days?"

The back of Cheng Qian's head fully showed his murderous intent.

At this point, Yan Zhengming's mentality had long since stopped being so disturbed like back then. Using meditation as a replacement for sleep was a regular occurrence for him. But this particular day, his mind suddenly became disturbed before dawnbreak, so he opened his eyes.

The colors of the night hadn't receded from the heavens. Cheng Qian had left at some point — ever since the day Yan Zhengming got to know him, Cheng Qian had never slept till the sun had risen. There was still some leftover warmth in the sheets.

Yan Zhengming sat silently for a moment, focusing his attention to consider himself. He didn't seem to have encountered any Trials, but he couldn't settle down no matter what... as if something was about to happen.

He lit the lamps with a wave of his hand, paced in his room a few times, and procured three copper coins from under the lampshade.

Yan Zhengming wasn't familiar with the path of divination. He had seen his master do this before, but whenever he tried to ask about it, Master never agreed to teach him, only saying, "Foreknowledge of the future is the culmination of the Dao and the beginning of ignorance. This is a dishonest practice, there is no need for in-depth knowledge."

Was something important about to occur on Azure Dragon Island?

The three copper coins danced between his deft fingers. After turning them about for a moment, he cleared his mind and sat down to silently recite the *Scriptures on Clarity and Stillness*.

As expected, Zhou Hanzheng was a harbinger of misfortune. Nothing good ever came from his presence.

Han Yuan's information was proven to be true. The next day, news of the Grand Competition was announced at the Lecture Hall. The mysterious, rarely seen Left Protector and the Right Protector with the face of a debt collector had both gathered on this rare occasion. It was announced that everyone who could absorb Qi into their body was required to participate. Those who didn't want to fight could forfeit and admit defeat, otherwise they must step up for the competition. The victors could enter the inner halls of the Azure Dragon Island to read the ancient records and listen to the lectures of the disciples without acknowledging the Island Lord as master.

While those endless rules were laid out up there, Cheng Qian sat on the ground without raising his head, carving a wooden tablet the size of his palm.

Yan Zhengming swept a quick glance and explained off-handedly to Han Yuan, "That's called the 'Puppet Charm'. Carrying it on your person could help ward off a calamity. It's a well-known visible charm, one of the Seven Great Charms. There are one hundred and eight carvings in total, each stroke interrelated. The strokes must never break, and must never be carved wrong... Look, this small askew stroke has ruined it."

The tip of Cheng Qian's burin seemed to have been bumped by something, his spiritual energy abruptly bursting out. Han Yuan felt a gust of raw, moist

energy hitting his face, which dispersed in the air quickly. His eyes widened in awe.

Yan Zhengming lazily leaned to one side, patted Cheng Qian's shoulder, and said, "You've only absorbed Qi into your body for six to seven years, but you dared to attempt the Seven Great Charms — You're really over-demanding, Tong Qian."

Cheng Qian put the ruined wooden tablet and burin aside, and sat still to regulate his Qi.

Yan Zhengming then continued his words to Han Yuan, "Mistakes in carving can either be caused by lack of practice or running out of energy... In the case of your Third Shixiong, he has run out of energy. Tong Qian, why did you suddenly want to carve this?"

Cheng Qian said casually, "I just wanted to try it."

Soon enough, Yan Zhengming found out why he wanted to try it.

While everyone was excitedly discussing the Azure Dragon Island's Grand Competition, Yan Zhengming saw Xueqing off at the port of Azure Dragon Island.

"Go and come back as soon as you can," Yan Zhengming said, "Go back to Fuyao Mountain first, and then go home. See if any of the expenditures were lacking, and replenish them with my funds."

At this point, Xueqing had grown into a young man, his appearance much more mature. He noted down each point and nodded in affirmation.

"That's all. You can go..."

“Xueqing-ge, wait!”

As they spoke, a flying horse came galloping toward them. Before it could come to a complete stop, Cheng Qian had jumped off of it. His appearance was evidently a bit disheveled, probably blown by the sea wind or something. When he landed, his breathing was even a bit ragged.

Xueqing had always been gentle and kind, never one for many words. When he was younger, he had been very attentive and meticulous in caring for Cheng Qian. Compared to Yan Zhengming, the Eldest Shixiong who often didn't act his part, Xueqing was more like a reliable older brother, so his relationship with Cheng Qian had always been quite good.

Xueqing smiled at him, “I will be back soon, so the Third Shishu must take good care of himself.”

“Nn, okay, I understand,” Cheng Qian nodded and procured a small cotton packet from his bosom, which he gave to Xueqing, “I thought I wouldn't make it. Carry this with you, be careful on your way.”

Yan Zhengming, who had been left out of the picture, asked, “What is this thing, for you to hurry and deliver from so far away?”

Xueqing opened the cotton packet and found a small wooden tablet inside. When he pulled it out for a closer look, Yan Zhengming went rigid — It was a completed Puppet Charm.

Cheng Qian said, slightly bashful, “My energy isn't enough, so I kept failing. Even after so many days, I could only struggle to complete this one. Keep it with you, but you still need to be careful on the way. Since this was my creation, if you encounter anyone whose cultivation is higher than mine, it would only be a useless piece of wood.”

Xueqing hurriedly said, “Yes, many thanks to Third Shishu.”

Yan Zhengming’s heart was filled with an unusual feeling of dissatisfaction. He thought, *I didn’t get any — I went through such pains to raise this little thankless wretch, but he never even carved a whistle for me. The Puppet Charm that he’d worked so hard on was given to someone else first, how ridiculous!*

But he was an honorable sect leader, so he couldn’t possibly kick up a fuss with his Shidi and a Daoist child in broad daylight. Yan Zhengming could only put on a straight face and solemnly told Xueqing to hurry back. After seeing him off, he didn’t even spare Cheng Qian a glance before turning to leave angrily.

But he’d only taken two steps when he realized that Cheng Qian was still looking at where the boat had gone, thoughts unclear, not even noticing Yan Zhengming’s anger. So Sect Leader Yan purposefully returned to wait. Only when Cheng Qian finally turned around with a heavy heart did Yan Zhengming act. He made a loud ‘hmpf’ for Cheng Qian to hear before turning to leave under his Shidi’s baffled eyes.

Cheng Qian looked around himself quickly and realized that there was nobody there, Yan Zhengming had directed his snort to Cheng Qian.

He asked in confusion, “Eldest Shixiong, what’s wrong with you now?”

Yan Zhengming ignored him, continuing on his way without a care. Cheng Qian had no clue what strange mood he’d fallen into, so he had half a heart to just leave him alone and let him go where he wanted to cool off, but the Sect Leader’s tantrums were very troublesome. Thus, in order to avoid the fate of becoming a Daoist child dedicated to brushing the Eldest Shixiong’s hair, Cheng Qian could only go after him.

As the two of them went on their way one after the other, even the flying horse had been left behind. The awkwardness continued until they returned to their dwellings. In the end, Cheng Qian no longer cared which wrong nerve of the Eldest Shixiong had been poked at, and was only following along helplessly.

Yan Zhengming forcefully slammed his door shut, keeping Cheng Qian outside.

Shuikeng, who was lazing around with the *Scriptures on Clarity and Stillness* in the courtyard, wasn't surprised by the seemingly strange sight — Normally, when the Eldest Shixiong was with the Second Shixiong, they were both quite dignified and seemed more similar to normal grown-ups. The Fourth Shixiong wasn't much better than her, so he rarely dared to cross the Eldest Shixiong. Only the Third Shixiong, each time with his face that seemed to say 'I didn't do anything', was able to anger the Eldest Shixiong until he lost all of his bearing.

Shuikeng leisurely hummed a tune, "Iya, look what sin the little sweetheart [2] has committed now —"

Cheng Qian went straight to her, stroked her head, and bent down to draw a circle of charms around her feet. He said gently, "It will disperse by itself after you've recited the scriptures thirty times. Be good now, stop looking. Not even 'the little sweetheart' can save you."

Shuikeng felt like she had set herself on fire.

Cheng Qian sauntered back to his own room. The moment he opened the door, his faint smile immediately froze. Cheng Qian abruptly turned around to sweep his eyes over the courtyard, but there wasn't a single person out there other than Shuikeng, who was murmuring the scriptures under her breath.

Cheng Qian hesitated, placed a hand on the wooden sword at his waist, and carefully went in, closing the door behind him — someone had entered his room and left an object behind.

It was a sword. Not a wooden sword — a real, genuine sword.

Its innate brilliance was profound, as if a spirit was dwelling within.

[1] *‘Sharpening the axe won’t interfere with cutting firewood’* The phrase used here is *磨刀不误砍柴工*. It’s a Chinese idiom, which means ‘making preparations won’t delay the actual work’.

[2] *‘sweetheart’* The word used here is *冤家*, which could both mean ‘little sweetheart’ or ‘archenemy’. Fun fact: there’s a Chinese expression, *冤家路窄*, which could both mean ‘Lovers are destined to meet’ and ‘Sworn enemies are bound to cross paths’, though the latter meaning is more commonly used. It is said that all conflicts or amorous feelings caused by these encounters are predestined by your past life.

The Chinese word for ‘Trial’ (with capital letter T) is *关卡*. In a literal sense, it means ‘bottleneck’. In a less literal sense, it means ‘major obstacle’. Since this seems to be a specific term (as in, it’s something that happens to cultivators once in three years), I’ve decided to capitalize it to make things clear.

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Cheng Qian had no need for a sword — the Fuyao Sect had an outrageously wealthy sect leader, so even if they had nothing else, they still had money. They could even toss aside used swords after they were done with them and there would still be no problem. But Cheng Qian had always been on the Azure Dragon Island and usually only came across people of Zhang Dasen's type. He wanted to polish his own swordplay, so he kept using his wooden sword.

A simple sword wouldn't be noteworthy, but this one was different. Cheng Qian could tell with just one look.

He didn't even need to think carefully to know that this wasn't from Yan Zhengming. First of all, this sword's scabbard was very unremarkable and a bit old, which didn't match up with their sect leader's preferences. Second of all, according to Sect Leader Yan's personality, he wouldn't commit any generous act in secret like this. Whenever Yan Zhengming wanted to gift anyone anything, he would make a great show to all of his martial brothers beforehand. Then he would hold a hair-brushing competition or something to mess with everyone until he was satisfied, and bestow the gift to anyone who had pleased His Lordship.

Looking closely, the sword's hilt and body was covered in fine carvings of charms, the patterns shockingly complicated, layers upon layers overlapping. Even Cheng Qian, with his experience of seeing numerous books on the Azure Dragon Island, couldn't immediately figure out what charms they were.

He raised his finger and reached for the sword, but stopped in his tracks before even touching it — when there was barely any distance left between his fingers and the sword, a strange, indescribable feeling had suddenly appeared in Cheng Qian's heart.

It was a cold sensation with the impression of metallic rust, almost unnoticeably hovering around the sword body, as if the sword was alive.

Cheng Qian was confused at first, but then he thought about a possibility. His eyes abruptly widened — there were invisible charms around this sword!

One must keep in mind that invisible charms were the very essence of charms, which can only be accomplished by legendary formidable masters. The only person who could create invisible charms in Cheng Qian's knowledge was his Shizu, the Progenitor of Demonic Arts, Lord Beiming.

But if they were to discuss this in detail, even Lord Beiming's invisible charm wasn't quite genuine, because the medium for it was very unique: his own soul. Rather than saying that this was his great mastery of charms, it was more like demonic cultivation of the Soulist path. It wasn't an honest practice.

There were plenty of people in the world who understood charms. People who could smith weapons were certainly not rare either. But how many of them had the skill to leave invisible charms around a sword's body?

Cheng Qian could practically picture it, how a sword like this must have been intensely fought over the moment it came into existence. But after a thorough search on the sword's body, he couldn't find its name.

Right then, Cheng Qian noticed a piece of paper peeking out from under the tea tray. One side of the note had been stained with some kind of fluid. He

touched a bit of it and brought it to his nose to figure out its scent, and became even more confused — it was blood.

Written on the bloodstained note were the words: “‘Shuangren’ returns to its rightful owner. Never use it recklessly, bear this in mind.”

Be it ‘Shuangren’ or ‘returns to its rightful owner’, Cheng Qian didn’t understand a word of this. He carefully examined his own room in detail and finally found another trail of blood near a window in the corner.

The person who’d left the sword must’ve exited from the back window. Shuikeng had been playing in the front courtyard all this time, so it made sense for her to not notice.

Cheng Qian hesitated for a moment, considering whether he should inform Yan Zhengming about this. But after reaching for the door repeatedly, he retracted his hand each time — the person who had left the sword might not have done it out of kindness. This issue didn’t seem like good news.

Cheng Qian had always been the type who chooses to give good news and never bad news. After thinking for a moment, he decided not to alarm the others. He pushed the window open and leapt out, stealthily following the trail of blood.

He lightly brushed his fingers over his eyelids, transferring his energy to his eyes. In an instant, the landscape before him burst to life. The bloodstains hidden in various spots instantly became visible to Cheng Qian.

He had no idea who the injured person was, but their injury didn’t seem serious, because that person was still very lively and had practically gone halfway around the Azure Dragon Island. When Cheng Qian followed the trail to a reef near the shore, he realized that the trail had broken.

Cheng Qian thought, *Could it be, they've jumped into the sea?*

While he was looking down from the shore, a sense of danger suddenly took form in his heart.

Cheng Qian wasn't sure whether this instinct had been trained through his cultivation or his frequent fights, but he trusted it very much. He immediately concealed his own presence and hid in a place that would face the back of any newcomers.

His timing was extremely close. At the very next moment, a few masked men descended from the sky and began searching around.

When Cheng Qian saw this, his pupils shrunk. The reason was simple: these people had come down from their flying swords.

He had no idea if Yan Zhengming could already fly on his sword, but he himself was still unable to. Moreover, even if he were to disregard their superior cultivation, there were still more than ten of them.

He didn't even need to guess what these people were up to. Seeing the way they moved in the middle of the night while covering their faces, it was clear that they weren't doing anything reputable.

Before Cheng Qian could consider things carefully, one of the masked men had produced a long, high-pitched whistle. A bird with a strange form immediately descended in response. The bird was as tall as a man, its spread wings quite a bit larger than Shuikeng's great wings. As if carrying the weight of the sky, it glided downward.

Cheng Qian could feel cold sweat beginning to form on his back — He had a Shixiong like Li Yun, who knew his share of random trivia, so Cheng Qian had heard a fair deal of information about strange things. He knew

that this bird was called the ‘Bird of Living Men’, which was specifically used to detect the presence of living people. Because it could fly, it was much more useful than a spiritual dog.

The Birds of Living Men were highly sensitive, so it must have noticed Cheng Qian long ago. After receiving its order, the first thing the bird did was cry out loudly in the direction where Cheng Qian was hiding.

No matter how agile he was, he wouldn’t be able to escape flying swords. Under the urgent situation, Cheng Qian hurriedly felt around his waist and found a few small bottles. He took a quick sniff and carelessly poured one over his body. These were Li Yun’s creations for them to mess around with. Cheng Qian wasn’t very clear on what they actually did, but he vaguely remembered that one of them could hide one’s body.

“Let’s try my luck.” As he thought this, Cheng Qian felt himself freeze, his entire body turning so stiff that he couldn’t move an inch.

Bitterness rose in chest. It seems that thanks to his Second Shixiong, he would have to bid his farewells here.

The bird and the masked men went straight for the temporarily paralyzed Cheng Qian, but the next moment, they went right past him, as if they hadn’t seen him.

Could it be, he actually had used the liquid that hid one’s body, but its side effect immobilized its user?

When he could finally struggle to move his eyes, Cheng Qian realized that his body hadn’t actually disappeared, he’d just turned into a rock.

Even though Li Yun’s unnamed rock-transformation liquid had saved his life, it had also kept Cheng Qian in place for an entire night. Those masked

men came and went, and only left near daybreak.

Before they departed, their leader cast his gaze around the area. Cheng Qian had a clear look of his eyes and instantly felt that this person seemed a bit familiar. At the very least, he must've seen those eyes before.

By the time Cheng Qian could move again, it was close to midday.

With the wind of the sea on him, he dragged his stiff body back to their dwellings and happened to come across Li Yun leaving his own room.

Li Yun's face looked haggard, so he clearly had been busy for the whole night too, but his spirits seemed alright. A veil hung over his face, thick fumes of burning smoke bursting out of the open door behind him, as if the room had recently caught on fire.

Li Yun weakly raised his head and said to Shuikeng, who was sitting on the edge of the wall to play with some bugs, "Little Shimei, catch."

He took out a pill and tossed it to Shuikeng.

Shuikeng often displayed some inhuman birdly qualities without her own knowledge — for example, her senses were far superior to normal children, so she was very good at catching things moving at high speeds. Hearing those words, she didn't even reach out with her hands. She unhurriedly stretched out her neck, opened her mouth, and accurately caught the pill in between her teeth.

She licked the pill, tasted the sweetness in it, and began crunching on it like candy.

Cheng Qian, "..."

Even though he knew that Li Yun had given her a pill to suppress her *yao* aura, he still couldn't help the strange feeling in his heart upon seeing this sight.

They had trained their Shimei so well that he couldn't help his amazement... except she wasn't trained too much like a human.

After seeing her eat the pill, Li Yun smiled at Cheng Qian, as if a burden had been lifted off his chest. He yawned and turned back to his own room.

A thought suddenly occurred to Cheng Qian, so he called out, "Wait, Second Shixiong, I have something to ask you."

Li Yun, "What?"

Cheng Qian, "Do you know a sword named 'Shuangren'?"

Li Yun's footsteps halted. He asked in puzzlement, "Shuangren? Why are you asking about it?"

"I happened to come across a tale," Cheng Qian casually said, "So you know about it?"

Li Yun frowned, "I've heard of it — It is said that this sword doesn't have an actual name. The sword is extremely cold, such that it could freeze blood and wouldn't heat even when thrown into the purifying flames of Samadhi, so it was called 'Shuangren'. I heard that other than this name, it also has another nickname, 'Sword of Miserable Death'."

... What a wonderful name.

Li Yun continued, “It is said that Shuangren came into this world to slay three great demons. The sword-wielder gained fame instantly, and the sword was also known to be a godly sword to vanquish demons. But within three to five years, the sword and its wielder both fell into the clutches of a great demon. From then on, countless lives were lost to Shuangren. By the time that great demonic cultivator gained the name of Beiming, the sword had become renowned as the greatest demonic sword under the heavens. Thirty years later, the Progenitor of Demonic Arts of that time was betrayed by his own disciple and was killed with this sword, so Shuangren fell into the hands of that demonic cultivator’s disciple. Another ten years passed, the Ten Great Sects laid a siege and slaughtered hundreds of demonic cultivators from various walks of life. The sword then fell into the hands of a righteous formidable master, and once again became a weapon of justice. Everyone thought that the dust would have settled after this, but guess what?”

Stunned by the story, Cheng Qian pressed on, “What?”

Li Yun smiled, “After a hundred and thirty-four years, that formidable master’s cultivation partner met an untimely death. After going through great suffering, that master committed suicide with Shuangren. Since then, this famous sword’s whereabouts became unknown — who told you about this ominous thing?”

Cheng Qian gave no reply and returned to his own room with a heavy heart.

Yet, ominous as it was, Shuangren to a sword-wielder was like a peerless beauty to a lecher, a rare treasure to a miser, an ancient scroll with no other copy to a scholar. Its charm was irresistible.

Cheng Qian picked it up a few times and put it down again. At last, he mustered up all of his willpower and locked the mysterious famed sword in his closet. When the lock clicked into place, he truly understood the phrase

‘to feel as if a knife was twisted in one’s heart’. He wished he could free the sword right then and keep it by his side at all times.

But there were lots of shady points regarding this issue. Cheng Qian couldn’t figure out who would infiltrate his room and leave this world-famous sword behind. It was already careless of him to directly go out in pursuit the day before, so before everything has been figured out, Cheng Qian had no plans to make any reckless decision.

Because of the Grand Competition, the entirety of Azure Dragon Island was in an uproar. Even Zhang Dasen and his people didn’t care to stir up trouble with Cheng Qian. Half a month later, a huge list of names was carved onto a large rock on the mountain slope of the Lecture Hall. The match-ups for the first round had been decided.

That day, the island was so crowded it was practically a sea of people. The mysterious, rarely-seen formidable masters stood in two lines, all of them wearing the same clothes.

It is said that the image of a person depends on their clothes. Wearing these white, flowing robes, even Tang Wanqiu seemed a bit more presentable. The Right and Left Protectors of the Lecture Hall stood on opposite sides of each other, but it seemed as if the river that divides Chu and Han flowed in between those two, none of them acknowledging each other.

The clothes might have been too white, because Tang Wanqiu’s pallor seemed quite grim. After quickly looking her over, Cheng Qian felt that she seemed even more unhappy than she usually was.

He swept another look and saw that Zhou Hanzheng didn’t seem too happy either. A mask-like smile hung on his face as he tapped his folded Sansi Fan against his palm, eyes wandering occasionally.

It suddenly occurred to Cheng Qian — he realized that the masked man's eyes seemed familiar, because they were just like Zhou Hanzheng's!

But before he could pursue this train of thought, the crowd suddenly stirred, followed by a deafening cheer. Cheng Qian didn't understand what was happening at first, but when he looked again, the formidable masters on the elevated platform had all risen to their feet. Someone exclaimed, "The Island Lord! The Island Lord has come in person!"

Among their group, only Yan Zhengming had ever met the Lord of Azure Dragon Island, so for a moment, even Cheng Qian couldn't help his curiosity. He stood on his tiptoes to follow the crowd's line of sight and saw the inner disciples proudly making their way through the crowd. Each of them looked like a celestial child, entering in a single line, and came to the elevated platform's center before soundlessly splitting in two lines.

After the band had reached its destination, the Lord of Azure Dragon Island's true form was revealed.

The Island Lord was a man with a tall built. According to the standards of common people, he couldn't have been much older than thirty, his facial features delicate and pretty. He wore a sky blue long robe, his long hair left untied on his back and not pulled into a *guan* [1]. In his hand was an azure dragon staff, which was slightly taller than his person.

The Island Lord didn't really raise his face as he walked and his stride wasn't long, so there was the impression of a delicate scholar about him. Only when he had reached the center of the platform did he raise his head slightly. He swept his gaze over the entire area, eyes pausing for a moment on Yan Zhengming.

As one of the Four Saints, not only was the Island Lord not imposing in any way, there was also an unspeakable gloomy air about him, like a fine

scholar who was so poor that he had become famished. After looking over the Fuyao Group, he retracted his gaze, nodded slightly to the Right and Left Protectors of the Lecture Hall, and took the seat of the host.

All these years, the Lord of Azure Dragon Island had been an almost nonexistent figure who never showed his face in public, so the crowd under the platform instantly became excited. But Yan Zhengming was frowning to himself. “Strange.”

Of course, this wasn’t the only strange thing.

Cheng Qian gave him a quick glance and heard Yan Zhengming say in a barely audible voice, “Hasn’t the Island Lord always been in seclusion, that he didn’t even show his face when the Celestial Market was opened? Why would he show up now, for a mere competition between the rogue cultivators and the disciples?”

Nobody answered him — Han Yuan, who was responsible for information gathering, had run off to god knows where.

The Azure Dragon Island was so crowded that it was a bit anxiety-inducing, so of course Han Yuan wouldn’t miss out on this. He had studied the list of match-ups carefully very early on. Speaking of which, this kid really deserved a beating, because whenever he was asked to memorize a bit of scriptures, he would always act like he was dying. But when it came to these useless things, he could remember them all with a quick glance. While he was looking, he also had to pay attention to the conversations around him and listen to all sorts of comments passed around everyone.

Judging from these people’s conversation, the rogue cultivators seemed to regard Zhang Dasen as a superior of sorts. Han Yuan was truly dissatisfied by this, thinking, *It’s just that my Little Shixiong dislikes showing off. That Zhang Dasen has been thoroughly beaten in private, he just didn’t have the*

face to admit it. These useless things, can't even acknowledge the great mountain before them.

Suddenly, he heard someone say, "Zhang Dasen? Eh... I'll put this bluntly, he's actually not that great."

Han Yuan instantly felt like he'd found someone of a similar mindset and stretched his neck to see the speaker.

The crowd instantly asked for an explanation. The speaker, sensing that he'd grabbed the people's interest, spoke unhurriedly, "Look, aren't there ten platforms? Ten victors are going to be decided separately. Only then would we, as the victors among the Lecture Hall's rogue cultivators, gain the right to enter the true Grand Competition of Azure Dragon Island and compete with the inner disciples."

Han Yuan was stunned.

That person continued, "Everyone, think about it. We've been on this island for more than five years, but other than those who were running errands, have you ever seen the inner disciples?"

Everyone shook their heads. Han Yuan squeezed to the forefront like an eel and yelled, "Big Brother, don't keep us guessing!"

That person made a 'heh' and shook his head, "The inner disciples' resources aren't something we can compare to. Moreover, I heard that the disciples who had superior qualities would go into seclusion in the mountains for eighteen years without ever coming out, spending each day going through grueling trials, unceasingly training themselves. That fellow Zhang Dasen is at most only the best among us, but if he were to go up against the real ones... Hehe."

After he spoke this far, he purposefully put up a mysterious act, shook his head while waving his hand, and said no more.

Han Yuan rolled his eyes and turned to run off.

[1] ‘*guan*’ The word used here is . It’s the headpiece commonly used in ancient China. Some people translate this into ‘hat’ or ‘crown’, but they aren’t quite right so I decided to use the original Chinese word.

Some terms that you might be interested in:

- Shuangren: (: ‘frost’; : ‘blade’), literally ‘blade of frost’. But it can also refer to a sword with an extremely sharp edge.
- purifying flames of Samadhi:
- the river that divides Chu and Han: , a figure of speech that means ‘a line that divides rival territories’

Han Yuan's own cultivation was sloppy, but he was very confident in his Shixiong. When he heard that even people of Zhang Dasen's level were regarded so highly, he immediately decided that his own Shixiong must be the victors. With his personality that seemed to fear any lack of conflict, he thought, "Might as well dig up some stuff about the inner disciples, so Shixiong could have an easier time."

The inner disciples who were with the Island Lord also wore white robes, but unlike the elders and the Protectors, the disciples' clothes were very plain. Seeing this group from afar, it seemed like they were dressed for deep mourning. They were very conspicuous, so Han Yuan didn't need to spend much effort to track them down.

The disciples gathered around the Island Lord made no sound as they walked. Probably because the rules for the inner disciples were strict or whatever, none of them spoke a word with each other. Each of them had the indifferent look of someone who had seen through the mortal world, not even a hint of joy on their faces. They silently left the crowd, turning their back toward the hustle and bustle, displaying a cold and quiet feeling of isolation.

Han Yuan knew that the Island Lord was a formidable master, so he didn't dare to get too close. He only climbed onto a large tree far away, his hand shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun as he looked at the group.

When they reached midway down the mountain slope, they all stopped at the same time. A few disciples carried a small sedan over and respectfully

offered it for the Island Lord to sit on.

This scene was very familiar for some reason. Han Yuan was instantly reminded of his Eldest Shixiong back then on Fuyao Mountain, who wouldn't stand if he could sit, who wouldn't sit if he could lie down, who always had to be carried on a sedan into the Mission Hall. For a moment, a feeling of familiarity and good humor came over him as he thought, *The Island Lord has reached this age, but why does he seem just like our Sect Leader when he was young?*

Right then, the Lord of Azure Dragon Island seemed to have noticed something and abruptly turned around. He looked at Han Yuan's hiding spot and directly met his gaze. Han Yuan almost fell from the tree, a feeling of guilt coming over him.

But the Island Lord seemed to know who he was. A smile spread on that gloomy face, but even when he was smiling, the knit between his brows remained, so the smile seemed forced. The Island Lord waved at him from the distance, as if telling Han Yuan to stop following him and hurry back.

The disciples stood motionlessly on both sides of the sedan, waiting for the Island Lord to settle himself on it before hoisting it up. The group of people instantly turned into a white blur and disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Han Yuan stared in bafflement on top of the tree. This development had stunned him, causing an unspeakable feeling of awe and admiration to form in his heart. He murmured to himself rather self-knowingly, "Good heavens, I probably won't ever reach that level in my life. How many years in seclusion would that take?"

Before he finished speaking, Han Yuan suddenly heard a faint laugh next to his ear. Startled, he grabbed some pines in his hand and exclaimed, "Who's laughing?"

The leaves behind him rustled faintly. Han Yuan abruptly turned around. The pines in his hand instantly disappeared into the thick foliage, and everything was silent.

Han Yuan carefully poked his head out for a look, but unexpectedly, his vision turned black the very next moment and he fell out of the tree.

By the time Han Yuan regained his consciousness, the bustling crowd on Azure Dragon Island had already dispersed. His temples throbbed as he looked around in a daze — he couldn't recall how he had fallen asleep under this large tree.

Han Yuan stretched his back and yawned so hard that it seemed like his head might split open from his mouth, but he still felt dazed. So he made himself get up and walk back home, feeling like he'd forgotten something important.

When he returned to the small courtyard of their sect, he saw Shuikeng sitting on the edge of the wall and his Second Shixiong Li Yun leaning on the side of the door. The two of them were watching with rapt attention as Cheng Qian and Yan Zhengming exchanged blows.

“Where did you go?” Li Yun waved at Han Yuan, “Hurry here, you almost missed something great.”

It was a spar between fellow disciples, so naturally they wouldn't bet their lives. Cheng Qian and Yan Zhengming each held an old wooden sword with blunt edges, its surface covered with dents. It wasn't clear whether the dents were caused by termites or if Shuikeng had gnawed on the swords when her teeth were growing, but the two of them looked like they were swinging shabby torches around. However, the sword techniques they were displaying weren't shabby in the least, their exchanges so quick that the eyes could hardly follow.

In the beginning, none of them had used their Qi in their moves, and had used no sword techniques other than Fuyao Wooden Swordplay. In a single instant, they had exchanged more than ten blows.

As one delved deeper into the art of swords, one would understand better what a profound, marvelous technique this series of wooden swordplay was.

A superficial understanding of this technique could easily be imparted to the disciples. But for a deeper understanding, they must experience it themselves.

Shuikeng said with great envy, “Second Shixiong, when will I get to learn swords?”

Without tearing his eyes away, Li Yun said casually, “When you grow taller than the sword, your Eldest Shixiong will teach you.”

Shuikeng jumped up on the edge of the wall and stretched her hands upward, trying hard to extend herself, as if wishing she would immediately grow as tall as a house. At the same time, she asked, “Why learn from Eldest Shixiong? Why not learn from the Third Shixiong?”

Li Yun smiled, “Your Eldest Shixiong is a true sword cultivator who entered the Dao through the sword. Your Third Shixiong’s sword techniques were trained through fighting and brawling, so it’s not genuine. The malicious energy is too strong, if you learn from him, you’ll definitely grow up to become a female demon who charges around violently.”

Before he could finish his words, a cold sword aura struck out from the sparring field, aimed straight at his face. Li Yun hurriedly leapt up and joined Shuikeng on top of the wall. He clicked his tongue, “Won’t even let people speak — See that, Little Shimei? That technique of his was our

Fuyao Wooden Swordplay, but the sword will embodied in it was from Tide Swordplay. A chilly cultivation method like that isn't good for little maidens like you, you'll be prone to stomachaches in the future."

Shuikeng was confused. For a moment, she couldn't understand how 'sword training' would have anything to do with 'stomachaches'.

This Shixiong's words were so uncouth that even Yan Zhengming, who was usually above such vulgarities, couldn't bear to keep listening. No longer able to contain himself, he warned, "Li Yun!"

Li Yun cackled on top of the wall's edge and patted Shuikeng's head.

Cheng Qian's mind was even more absent from the present than the confused Shuikeng, so he hadn't actually registered Li Yun and Yan Zhengming's exchange. But when he heard Li Yun mention Tide Swordplay, he was prompted by a sudden impulse and said, "Little Shimei, I'll show you what Tide Swordplay is — Eldest Shixiong, careful now!"

As he spoke, Cheng Qian suddenly changed moves. The former move of 'The Roc's Long Flight' and the following move of 'Gold and Sand' were connected flawlessly. The wind from the sword carried a chill that causes shivers. The courtyard instantly seemed like it had been swept over by mighty waves, tree leaves falling all over the place. Where the sword aura had passed, fine droplets of water had formed, even on the wall. Li Yun was forced to make a seal with his hands, forming an invisible barrier in front of the spectators to avoid inflicting misfortune on innocent people.

Yan Zhengming's hairpin was struck by the sword aura and instantly broke, but he remained calm. The mild and temperate aura from his wooden sword spilled out, but it didn't disperse the way Cheng Qian's offensive strike had, instead wrapping itself steadily around the sword body, remaining steadfast and unmoving.

Cheng Qian's eyes lit up, "Eldest Shixiong, you've reached the stage of 'Concretion'?"

The stage of cultivation called 'Concretion', is spreading one's energy around the body and infusing one's consciousness onto the sword. Only those who have reached 'Concretion' and could control their own energy freely would be able to advance further and become one with their blade, allowing travel by flying on their sword.

Judging from this, Yan Zhengming might have really reached the level of flying on his sword.

The very next moment, their swords collided in midair. The battered wooden swords couldn't withstand this force, so they both snapped at the same time. Cheng Qian's sword aura immediately dispersed. He caught the broken half of the sword in his hand and casually slashed out a curve, smiling, "It seems I would need to add another two hours to my sword training, otherwise I'd fall behind you."

Cheng Qian rarely smiled. Following his growth, any great display of emotion disappeared from his face, giving him the gentlemanly aura of someone who rarely shows his feelings. At this moment, the curve of his eyes held no hidden intents, which brought out some rarely-seen air of adolescence.

Cheng Qian had always had fine features, which only grew more apparent as he became a young man. If he hadn't set foot onto the cold path of cultivation, he would've received many fruits thrown his way [1] among the common folks.

Yan Zhengming was stunned for a moment, a strange feeling suddenly stirring in his heart. Instinctively, he swung his broken sword in a half curve, allowing the wooden sword to guide the Qi inside him. A gust of

sword energy burst forth, so warm and tender that it was almost unnoticeable.

On top of the wall, Shuikeng exclaimed in surprise. The sword energy had passed by, brushing against her skirt, but hadn't left any mark on the soft fabric, and fell on some half-dead withered grass on top of the wall. Under everyone's scrutiny, the yellow leaves of the withered grass regained its green color, its body slowly straightening up. From it, a small yellow flower blossomed.

Han Yuan and Shuikeng looked at the flower in astonishment. Han Yuan asked, "Eldest Shixiong, which technique is this? It's my first time seeing a sword technique causing a flower to bloom!"

Yan Zhengming had become much more mature, but when facing his own people, he still couldn't change his habit of showing off. Hearing those words, his eyes gleamed. On a whim, he stretched out his hand. The withered grass on the wall instantly sprouted a cluster of wild roses, spreading out and forming a frame filled with colorful flowers of various sizes. Hanging on the wall, it looked like a lingering red apricot tree.

Yan Zhengming pulled his sleeves back in satisfaction and gave an enigmatic smile, "This is a technique from the fifth form, 'Return to Trueness'. It's called 'Spring Upon a Withered Tree'."

Li Yun saw that he was about to show off [2] again and helplessly massaged his own forehead. Shuikeng and Han Yuan, as the younger ones, were very good at observing the situation, so they immediately showed support and gave a round of applause and cheers.

Cheng Qian was the only one who refused to give the Sect Leader any face. After a quick glance, he mercilessly commented, "Oh, so it's this technique. No wonder you'd been so strange earlier, neither attacking nor defending.

I've been wondering what use that thing could possibly have. So it's used to make flowers bloom after fighting!"

"You speak a lot of nonsense," Yan Zhengming was still immersed in the earlier atmosphere, so his tone was much gentler than usual. He pointed at Cheng Qian and said, "Comb my hair."

Li Yun grabbed the back of Shuikeng's clothes and brought her down from the wall. He told her, "If you can recite the *Scriptures on Clarity and Stillness* ten times before sunset, I'll perform the opening moves of our sect's swordplay for you."

Hearing this, Shuikeng became extremely excited. The opening moves were still part of the swordplay! She hurriedly ran off to get her small book of scriptures.

Her Shixiong knew exactly what kind of nonsense the 'opening moves' were, so all of them could barely keep their laughter in. They wondered if their little Shimei would cry in anger after she found out that the opening moves was a round of yelling 'Live to surpass immortals'.

Han Yuan began his daily assignment of thirty wooden charms at the entrance of the courtyard. Li Yun picked up a book to begin scribbling and doodling. Cheng Qian was tugging at... no, combing the Sect Leader's hair. The Sect Leader himself was suffering the consequences of his own wrong decision — his scalp felt like it had been numbed by this clumsy brat's ministrations.

The remaining rays of the setting sun enveloped the rolling hills of Azure Dragon Island. Yan Zhengming's eyelids drooped as he thought, *If, in the future, our days on Fuyao Mountain could be this cheerful, repeating each day forevermore would definitely count as 'surpassing immortals'.*

Yan Zhengming suddenly couldn't help missing Fuyao Mountain. If things were to go his way, he didn't actually want the sect to be too well-known. There was no need to be like Azure Dragon Island, which was always filled with so many people every day. As long as they could pass down their ancestors' hard work and not be looked down on when they go out, it was all enough.

In the future, after his Shidi had grown up, they might take their own disciples too. He could turn Master's Unknown Hall into a place for the disciples to receive their lectures and punishments. If any of the disciples had caused mischief, he could send the immovable Tong Qian to deal with them.

As Yan Zhengming thought about this, he voiced his thoughts, "When we return to Fuyao Mountain in the future, after we take our own disciples, we could also hold an annual grand competition in our sect. When the time comes, anyone whose disciple loses must do the dishes together with their disciples... Ow, Tong Qian! Are you trying to make me bald?"

Cheng Qian had a wooden brush in his mouth, so his words were muddled, "You should have turned bald long ago."

Han Yuan poked at the charm that he'd failed to carve due to being distracted, and asked lightly, "Little Shixiong, you're up for the first round tomorrow. What do you think, how long would it take for you to win?"

Before Cheng Qian could answer, Yan Zhengming had interrupted in surprise, "What, first round tomorrow? Tong Qian, why didn't you say so earlier? Go to my place later and pick a good sword. The grand competition isn't the same as usual fights. No matter what, you can't go up there with a wooden sword, do you hear me?"

Cheng Qian made a sound in response, a clump of hair still held in his hand. In an off-handed manner, he asked, “What do you think, should I win to the end?”

Yan Zhengming’s eyebrows shot up. It felt like this Shidi of his had become even more reckless. Those words made it seem like he had no acknowledgement for the formidable masters under the heavens, so Yan Zhengming couldn’t help reminding him of his place, “If I say yes, could you really wipe out the entire Lecture Hall and stand at the top of Azure Dragon Island?”

Cheng Qian smiled, “I might not be able to win, but if you feel the need, I will spare no effort and give it my all.”

Cheng Qian rarely said words like ‘spare no effort’, so these words held much more weight when he spoke them. He wasn’t the type to throw such words around casually, so if he said he would ‘spare no effort’, he really would fight until his last breath.

For a moment, Yan Zhengming couldn’t describe his own emotions. He sighed to himself, feeling that no amount of doting on Cheng Qian would be too much. Even the pain of Cheng Qian plucking out strands of his hair was forgiven at once.

Yan Zhengming said softly, “Xiao-Qian...”

Cheng Qian, “Nn, I’ve finished.”

Li Yun raised his eyes for a glance and immediately choked on his own spit, coughing until he was out of breath, as if he was on the verge of death. Han Yuan had long since covered his own eyes, unable to witness the sight.

Shuikeng trotted back after fetching her book of scriptures and was greeted with the sect leader's new image. She instantly became stunned, mouth falling open, and looked up at him in reverence — Cheng Qian had attached a flower on both sides of the Eldest Shixiong's head, the flowers symmetrical against each other. It was as if beautiful, colorful blossoms had sprouted on the crown of his head. If he'd changed into some mauve skirts, the Eldest Shixiong could immediately go out for a matchmaker to find him a spouse!

After a moment, a howl of anger was heard in the courtyard, "Cheng! Qian!"

This little bastard didn't deserve any doting! What use was it to raise him?

Cheng Qian made his way through the courtyard quickly and went straight into his own room, about to close the door in his Eldest Shixiong's face. But right then, the urgent sounds of bells and drums suddenly rang through the shades of dusk on Azure Dragon Island.

The bell's tolls rang repeatedly, the drum's sounds so closely intermittent that it felt like each chime was a strike to their hearts.

The smile on Cheng Qian's face froze, the half-closed door stuck halfway. "What happened?"

Li Yun rose to his feet, his face turning solemn. He frowned, "If I remembered correctly, bells were warnings, drums were calls for the inner disciples to assemble and ward off enemies — what, could someone have dared to invade Azure Dragon Island?"

"Shuikeng, come here, don't run off," Yan Zhengming called out to Shuikeng, who was about to look out the gates, "I'll send someone to ask around outside — Zheshi..."

Before he could finish his words, the door of the courtyard had been pushed open forcefully from outside. Zheshi panted for breath as he came in behind someone, “Wait! Zhenren, you...”

The people in the courtyard turned to the entrance at the same time. Tang Wanqiu was standing there, face expressionless.

Without any preamble, Tang Wanqiu spoke, “Come with me.”

Yan Zhengming came forward and asked, “Senior, what has happened on the island? Where are you taking us?”

Tang Wanqiu had never had the patience to explain things, so she turned around and wordlessly took hold of Shuikeng’s clothes. In the midst of the little girls’ screams, she carried her like a small package and left quickly, tossing the words, “Don’t dawdle!”

Like this, everyone in the Fuyao Sect had no choice but to go after her. Cheng Qian was just about to leave, but he suddenly recalled something and turned back with a wave of his hand. The lock on a crate in the corner instantly fell open. Shuangren flew straight out from inside and dropped into his hand.

[1] *‘received many fruits thrown his way’* The phrase used here is . It’s an expression that refers to beautiful men, which has a story as follows:

There was a man in Chinese history named Pan Yue (later known as Pan An), who was famed for his beauty. In order to see this beautiful man, people would always gather in the streets whenever he goes out in his

carriage. Among the crowd admiring him, the young women who wanted to express their adoration for him would toss fresh flowers and fruits toward his carriage. Later on, the phrase ‘having fruits thrown one’s way’ or ‘having one’s carriage filled with fruits’ became associated with beautiful men receiving the adoration of women.

[2] ‘*show off*’ The phrase used here is *show off*, which is actually the word used for when a peacock displays its tail.

Some new terms in this chapter:

- Gold and Sand: *Gold and Sand*, literally ‘mighty waves crashing against sand’. A figure of speech, meaning ‘to experience trials under great pressure’.
- Concretion: *Concretion*, literally ‘to gather or solidify one’s mind’. This phrase usually means ‘to focus one’s attention’.
- Spring upon a Withered Tree: *Spring upon a Withered Tree*, a figure of speech which means ‘to enjoy good fortune after a long spell of bad luck; a new lease of life; to be revived’.

The entirety of Azure Dragon Island was illuminated by lanterns. The night patrols that should've been increased for the Grand Competition had disappeared to god knows where, so the rogue cultivators had practically become a bunch of headless flies, creating a huge commotion. Rumors buzzed in the air, all sorts of tales being spread around — some were saying that demonic cultivators had come to make a scene, some were saying that the Island Lord had experienced a Qi deviation... The most ridiculous rumor was, some were saying that a real great azure dragon was sealed under the island, that the great dragon had escaped somehow and was out to look for food, that the bunch of cultivators on the island would only be enough for a midnight snack.

Tang Wanqiu kept a constant distance of three *zhang* from Yan Zhengming's group, probably intending to wait for them. Yan Zhengming could see this, so he didn't act against her. But Shuikeng, who was being held like a package in her hand, was quite a bit more pitiful. She was both scared and dizzy from being swung around, so she couldn't help crying. Fortunately, Li Yun had used pills to suppress the *yao* blood in her beforehand. If they'd left her to cry without inhibition all along the way, the entirety of Azure Dragon Island would've experienced an earthquake. It most definitely would be spread around as some kind of malicious, bizarre occurrence.

Tang Wanqiu led them past the mountain slope of the Lecture Hall and into a forest. She stopped in front of a cluster of stone tablets.

This place was called the ‘Forest of Tablets’, in which stone tablets were erected in memory of the formidable masters of Azure Dragon Island who had either ascended or perished. It was something like the ancestral hall of the common people. Cheng Qian and the others had heard of it before, but since they were only guest cultivators and not the disciples of Azure Dragon Island, they wouldn’t come here for no reason.

Tang Wanqiu loosened her hand and tossed Shuikeng aside. After crying along the way, any fear in Shuikeng’s heart had been exhausted, leaving only shock and anger. The moment she regained freedom, she aimed at Tang Wanqiu’s hand and bared her teeth, about to bite her.

But before Shuikeng’s teeth could close in, Tang Wanqiu suddenly looked down at her. In this moment, Tang Zhenren, who rarely showed much of her emotions, had red rims around her eyes. It seemed like she didn’t want to show anything in front of a child, so she clenched her teeth and forcefully put on a scowl. It didn’t make her seem like she was forcefully suppressing her pain, instead giving her the impression of a guardian deity [1] with fierce eyes.

After meeting her gaze for a moment, Shuikeng wasn’t intimidated, instead sensing something the way a sensitive little beast would. She silently retracted her milk teeth and was dragged back by her concerned Eldest Shixiong.

With her back toward them, Tang Wanqiu spoke stiffly, “Under the Island Lord’s order, I will send you away from this place tonight.”

Yan Zhengming was surprised, “Senior, what in the world has happened on the Island? Even though us juniors aren’t very useful, we’ve still gone so many years under the Island Lord’s blessing. If there is anything we can do to help...”

When she heard him say ‘blessing’, Tang Wanqiu was finally moved, just the slightest bit. She turned back to look at him and said in a flat voice, “Sect Leader Yan, you only need to keep that grace in your heart. At this moment, protect your own life first!”

After that, she pointed at the ground and exclaimed, “Open!”

The ground on the Forest of Tablets suddenly rumbled. A gap of two *chi* square was split open on the ground, its inside pitch black, some stone steps vaguely visible. It was a secret passage.

Tang Wanqiu made a seal with her hands. At her fingertips, sparks of flame gathered, dispersing to light up the torches along the walls with a snap of her fingers, instantly illuminating the passage. Tang Wanqiu led the way down and urged them, “Don’t dawdle!”

Yan Zhengming exchanged a quick glance with Li Yun. Li Yun frowned and said in a low voice, “Shixiong, follow her for now.”

Ever since the Island Lord showed his face for the Grand Competition, Yan Zhengming had vaguely felt that something was off. But he didn’t know any inside information, so he was completely clueless at this moment. He was also carrying Shuikeng, who was wiping her snot with his sleeve, so he didn’t even have the strength to be confused.

Yan Zhengming passed Shuikeng over to the few Daoist children who had followed, and couldn’t help looking back. Cheng Qian stood steadily at the very back, eyes originally gazing in the Lecture Hall’s direction. As if sensing Yan Zhengming’s gaze, Cheng Qian abruptly turned around and gave him a nod. It seemed like even if the heavens were to collapse and the earth were to crack, he was prepared.

But Yan Zhengming knew that he wasn't actually prepared, he just didn't care either way, so he couldn't help laughing a little. But after he finished laughing, he suddenly felt a bit calmer. Yan Zhengming held his sword firmly and went into the passage after Tang Wanqiu.

There wasn't much space in the passage. Tang Wanqiu, who was walking at the forefront, was still alright, but Yan Zhengming had to keep his head down all along the way. The wall torches on both sides had been enhanced with charms, so they remained unmoving when people passed by. Nobody spoke a word along the way, which made the atmosphere seem extremely tense. It was easy to lose their way underground. As they kept circling around, Cheng Qian mentally kept track of the distance. Right when he felt that they were about to leave Azure Dragon Island, another flight of stairs appeared before them.

This set of stone steps kept going up and down, the space so cramped that even Shuikeng had to bend down slightly. The others had to practically crawl their way out, the group of cultivators throwing aside all dignity as they squeezed through the passage.

Li Yun finally couldn't help speaking up, "Wonder where she's taking us..."

Yan Zhengming shook his head. He turned back with some difficulty to say, "Zheshi, take good care of our Shimei."

After hearing this line, Han Yuan behind him was also reminded of something.

Han Yuan hurriedly patted around his robes and procured a chain of pendants. They were the Soul-Searching Needles that he'd found a few years ago at the Celestial Market. The tips of the needles were poisoned, so they had been put inside small and delicate wooden cases, a straw

rope threaded through the eye of the needles. At a glance, they had the unique air only found on beggars who roam the streets.

Thinking back on it, when Han Yuan first got the Soul-Searching Needles, he'd thought that since there were so many people who look down on them on this island, the needles would probably be used up quickly. But he always had his Shixiong to protect him, so the three needles had remained until now.

Han Yuan placed the string of needles around Shuikeng's neck and said, "If anyone tries to harm you, take off the wooden plug and stab them with this."

As they spoke, they'd reached the end of the stone steps. Tang Wanqiu struck at a piece of stone, shattering the two *chi* thick stone slab into pieces. This senior was practically a firecracker that charged around without a care. Yan Zhengming had almost lost his patience, so he only followed her out silently.

The moment he poked his head out, Yan Zhengming felt a gust of sea wind blowing against his face. He looked closer and realized that this place was a secret port. There was only one boat here. Looking carefully, the boat wasn't that noteworthy, but it seemed like it could blend into the shades of the night. If it hadn't been so close in front of their eyes, they might not have noticed that there was such a large thing here.

"Get on," Tang Wanqiu said, "There's no boatman, but your sect has always been well-versed in charms. The boat can be navigated with charms, figure things out yourselves. If you'd all been able to fly on your swords, it wouldn't have been so troublesome."

Tang Wanqiu's attitude had always given the impression of 'The heavens are the greatest, and I'm the second'. When these words left her mouth,

they should have carried some ridicule about their low cultivation, but strangely, she didn't seem to mean that this time.

She turned to look at the pitch black sky and the even darker sea, and said in a low, barely audible voice, "Too soon, there's not enough time..."

For a brief moment, her entire person seemed to have been drowned in the dark shades of the night. Her skirt and hair swayed lightly in the sea wind, almost giving off the impression that she was a bit fragile.

After a long while, Tang Wanqiu finally said, "That day, I'd actually seen Han Muchun, but I didn't dare to identify him — I might be... a bit crude as a person, so I couldn't immediately figure out if he wanted to be identified."

But she had always been clumsy regarding people. Before she could make up her mind, that person had disappeared.

Yan Zhengming was stunned for a moment, and finally understood — She was referring to the great battle against the demonic cultivator on the East Sea five years ago.

Tang Wanqiu, "You... uh, are a bit similar to your Master when he was younger."

As she spoke, she lowered her head slightly and tucked a strand of her long hair behind her ear. This was a gesture that many girls would do unconsciously, but when she did it, there seemed to be some kind of shocking past behind it.

After saying those words in the gentlest manner she'd ever shown in her life, her attitude immediately hardened again. She told Yan Zhengming,

“After leaving this place, don’t go back to Fuyao Mountain. Go train yourself among the common folks, or find a good place to continue cultivating. Don’t ever let anyone else know you’re from the Fuyao Sect.”

Yan Zhengming asked experimentally, “Senior, hasn’t Fuyao Sect long since become an insignificant small sect? Even if we tell others about it, would anyone know?”

“The insignificant people would naturally be ignorant of it, but those who should be in the know, and even those who shouldn’t be in the know, will be aware,” Tang Wanqiu said, “Don’t dawdle, get on the boat and leave...”

Before she could finish her words, a pillar of light suddenly shot toward the heavens. For a moment, the entire island turned white due to the intensity of the light, that they couldn’t even open their eyes.

Tang Wanqiu’s pupils narrowed, a look of worry on her face.

Right then, Cheng Qian, who had been standing at a moderate distance at the very end of their group, suddenly straightened up and raised Shuangren slowly, “Who?”

Whooshing sounds were heard in the air. A group of masked men appeared like ravens, descending one after the other. In an instant, they had surrounded the group.

Their leader stood out, speaking with his face hidden behind a black veil, “The Azure Dragon Island has proclaimed martial law. From now on, boats are forbidden from leaving!”

Tang Wanqiu caught Cheng Qian's shoulder and forcefully shoved him aside before stepping up herself, "I've never heard the Island Lord say anything about proclaiming martial law. What are you up to?"

The masked man laughed coldly in a low voice and cupped his hand with his other in greeting for Tang Wanqiu, "Zhenren, no need to lose your temper. Even if you'd gotten on the boat, none of you would be able to leave."

After he finished speaking, he raised his head, as if hinting something. The night sky was illuminated by countless spots of light, which looked like fireflies from this distance.

Shuikeng was about to cry again, but Zheshi covered her mouth. Li Yun asked in a low voice, "Shixiong, what is that..."

Yan Zhengming retracted his gaze after looking around, answering, "The fluorescent light that the sword emits, caused by the Qi it receives when a person flies on the sword."

Li Yun couldn't help panicking, "What? So many of them? Who are they coming for? They can't have been aiming for us, right?"

Li Yun had always been the type who was sharp under normal circumstances, but would lose his senses in crucial moments.

The moment he said these words, Yan Zhengming understood what he was thinking — That's right, the bunch of them were but some insignificant disciples from an insignificant small sect. They had never left their mountain, and had stayed in Azure Dragon Island once they left Fuyao Mountain. The most prominent thing they'd ever done was fighting with some rogue cultivators. Judging from how the other party had gathered such a large force, they were most probably coming for

Tang Wanqiu. She had the ability to insult everyone under the heavens, so this could have been some kind of disaster she'd brought from somewhere.

Li Yun said softly, "Eldest Shixiong, if they're not here for us, then..."

Yan Zhengming caught Li Yun's elbow and shook his head. He didn't think it was that simple. The island was in such an uproar, so why wasn't Tang Wanqiu helping out there and was here to secretly send them off instead?

He keenly sensed something from Tang Wanqiu's warning of 'Never mention that you are from Fuyao Sect'.

Suddenly, Cheng Qian spoke up after staying silent all this time. Without any shred of doubt, he said, "That person is Zhou Hanzheng."

Yan Zhengming was stunned, "What? How did you know?"

Cheng Qian expressionlessly stared at the eyes of the masked men's leader, and said lightly, "Him? I can recognize him even if he has turned to dust."

Yan Zhengming, as the true victim of Zhou Hanzheng, might have already forgotten — he had always been like this. He might fight with others, he might be angry with people, but he had never kept grudges. Even though he couldn't forget the humiliation of being thrown off the elevated platform back then, it hadn't left any particular deep grudge in his heart. In any case, even if Zhou Hanzheng wanted to throw him off the platform again, it might not be so easy now. If he had the spare energy, he would rather think back to his happy days as a young boy on Fuyao Mountain.

But Cheng Qian wasn't the same. Each time he couldn't continue practicing with his sword, or whenever he felt like he couldn't endure the Trial he was going through, he would think back to the Zhang brothers and Zhou Hanzheng. As his cultivation improved rapidly, Zhang Dasen's type had slowly fallen out of his attention, so all of his vengeful feelings were turned toward Zhou Hanzheng alone.

After a quick look around, Cheng Qian stepped forward and raised his voice slightly to speak to Tang Wanqiu, "Tang Zhenren, this junior is extremely grateful for the Island Lord's attention to us all these years, but there is one thing I don't understand — why would he allow someone of dubious origins to enter the Lecture Hall?"

Tang Wanqiu was first stunned by his words, but immediately turned to face him, "What did you say?"

Upon hearing this, the masked men's leader looked at Cheng Qian... and Shuangren in his hand. He laughed in a low voice, "As expected, you were the one that the Bird of Living Men had sensed. You're quite resourceful for a brat, to be able to hide away."

Previously, he had suppressed his own voice on purpose, but he'd shown his real voice then. No matter how bad Tang Wanqiu's ears might be, she recognized it this time. Disbelief immediately showed on her face, "Zhou Hanzheng?"

The masked man saw that he couldn't keep pretending, so he simply took off the veil over his face with the fearlessness of someone with strong backing. Revealing the face of a scholar who would think thrice before he acted, he smiled, "Tang Daoyou [2], since you've asked, why don't we go back to meet our guests with the Island Lord?"

Tang Wanqiu's eyes widened, and then she blew up in fury, "The debts of gratitude you have toward the Island Lord are as heavy as a mountain, but you dared to ally yourself with others?"

Zhou Hanzheng sighed with an air of self-satisfaction, "Tang Zhenren's words aren't right. I'm not a part of Azure Dragon Island to begin with, I've never allied myself with anyone, and had only become a Protector on the Island because the Island Lord thought highly of me — Oh? What, did I remember wrong? Hadn't Tang Zhenren come from Mulan Mountain, and is also not a disciple of Azure Dragon Island?"

Of course, Tang Wanqiu wouldn't listen to his nonsense. Without another word, she brandished the heavy sword on her back and produced a swift and fierce wind in a single swing. She didn't seem to fear the sword riders, and looked like she was going to smash Zhou Hanzheng's head to smithereens just like that.

Zhou Hanzheng leapt into the air lightly. The Sansi Fan was turned in his hand, sparks of fire and lightning flickering. When they collided with Tang Wanqiu's sword aura, a loud, booming sound was heard, both sides cancelling each other out. A part of the ground was instantly scorched.

Zhou Hanzheng had a seemingly gentle face, but there was no mercy in his heart. Yan Zhengming felt anxious even though he was only watching, and quickly realized that his earlier thought of 'Zhou Hanzheng wouldn't be able to throw him off the platform so easily' had been decided too early. Not only was Zhou Hanzheng not weak in the slightest, he was also very shameless. He didn't seem to have any intention of fighting Tang Wanqiu one-on-one, so with a wave of his fan, Zhou Hanzheng told the masked men, "Capture this person!"

Tang Wanqiu roared, "I'd like to see you try!"

The raven-like masked men descended one after another, completely filling up the small port. Yan Zhengming's sword was like condensed rays of light as he stood on it at a moderate height. He made a seal with his hands, instantly creating a few figures that were on their swords just like him. This kind of technique, which diverted one's own attention, was extremely draining — he was planning to take down all the masked men in the air on his own.

Cheng Qian had half a mind to try out Shuangren with that Zhou person, but he looked back at the pale Li Yun and everyone else, and forced himself to calm down. He remained unmoving next to Zheshi, who was holding Shuikeng.

Two masked men landed stealthily and came toward Cheng Qian's group from the other side. They clearly didn't think much of Cheng Qian, a mere teenager. Holding their swords horizontally in front of themselves, they charged forward, seemingly intending to silence them by taking them out.

Cheng Qian didn't back down and pushed forward instead. With no word of greeting, he answered to their attacks with the move 'Surging Waves Beating the Shore'.

At that moment, Cheng Qian finally realized the difference between his shabby wooden sword and this famed sword that had claimed countless lives. With just a slight shift of Shuangren, an indescribable coldness swept over the entire port. In the instant when the weapons collided, Cheng Qian could almost hear the previous generation's screams of fury and vengeance, ringing so deafeningly loud in his ears. A layer of frost visibly formed on the blade, which easily cut through the two masked men's weapons. Cheng Qian's core was stirred mercilessly, giving him the misconception that his body was about to explode.

That's right, the note had said 'Never use it recklessly'...

Cheng Qian was stunned at first, his first instinct telling him to toss the sword away. But with just the slightest hesitation from him, more masked men came forward at once, one of them even reaching out to grab Shuikeng. Cheng Qian steeled himself and thought, "Whatever happens, happens. Get rid of these people before considering those."

And so, without halting his steps or changing his technique, he struck again with the move 'Surging Waves Beating the Shore'. The two masked men had decided that since Cheng Qian hadn't reached Concretion, his cultivation must be limited, so he shouldn't be able to handle two people alone. They had no idea that his sword skills had been trained by using a wooden sword — wooden swords are fragile and could snap easily, their capacity to contain Qi very limited. Not only did the sword wielder have to control their strength, they also had to do it very accurately. Using that kind of sword, Cheng Qian had dared to combine Tide Swordplay, which used long strides in its footwork, and the greatly dynamic and ever-changeable Fuyao Wooden Swordplay to wipe out the Lecture Hall. On the path of the sword, he had long since accomplished further than those who had reached Concretion and could fly on their swords.

What's more, he now had the famed sword 'Shuangren' in his hands.

The sword glare was like purple lightning and azure frost. As if sensing its wielder's murderous intent, the sword aura instantly increased to cover three *chi*. The sound of ripped silk was instantly heard — Cheng Qian had slit the two men's throats in one slash, causing blood to paint the air. When the droplets landed on the 'Sword of Miserable Death', they formed a layer of frost the color of blood.

[1] ‘*guardian deity*’ The word used here is . It refers to Buddha’s warrior attendant and could also refer to ‘vajra’, a mythical weapon. (It’s also the Chinese translation for King Kong, but considering the setting of this novel, I’m quite certain we’re not talking about a giant ape monster.)

[2] ‘*Daoyou*’ The word used here is . It’s commonly used to address or refer to a fellow cultivator.

The name of Cheng Qian’s technique in Chinese, Surging Waves Beating the Shore:

The elders often said: if a weapon had been stained with too much blood, it would become a lethal weapon. As a lethal weapon was used to commit countless evil, vengeful emotions were bound to accumulate in it.

There are thousands of lethal weapons in the world, each of them malicious in their own way. But none of them had the special honor of leaving such an indelible impression in people's hearts the way the 'Sword of Miserable Death' did.

The moment Shuangren touched blood, Cheng Qian could almost hear hoarse screams coming from the blade even though he hadn't reached Concretion, his spine turning numb from the pain. At the same time, with the difference in capability between a legendary sword and a wooden sword, the speed at which they drained one's energy also differed greatly. As Cheng Qian wielded Shuangren, for the first time in his life, he experienced how it felt for his ability to fall short of his wishes.

The masked men never expected a little brat to be so troublesome. After a slight pause, they made some signs that outsiders didn't understand and immediately disregarded everyone else to surround Cheng Qian.

Cheng Qian exhaled slowly, feeling as if he'd breathed out a mouthful of frost. The coldness from Shuangren seemed to have permeated his entire body, that even his innards had cooled.

Seven to eight sword auras came toward him at the same time. Cheng Qian knew that receiving them directly was asking for death, so he moved in

between the gaps to avoid the attacks. He'd have to thank Zhang Dasen, who kept stirring up trouble with him, for training his dodging ability to this point.

While avoiding the attacks, Cheng Qian had meant to lead these masked men away from Shuikeng and the others. But right when it seemed like he could still keep going, his entire body suddenly staggered, as if he'd received a heavy hit. One of the masked men's sword aura cut into him, blood instantly drenching his left shoulder.

But Cheng Qian had no space of mind to feel the pain. There was a deafening ringing in his head — it was the Puppet Charm that he'd given to Xueqing. Just now, he'd sensed clearly that the Qi in the Puppet Charm had dispersed. The Puppet Charm was one of the Seven Great Charms, carved with one hundred and eight strokes, how could the Qi contained within in disperse so easily? Xueqing must have encountered a mortal threat.

Then he... was he still alive?

He was just a Daoist child who'd gone out all by himself. There was nothing valuable on his person, and his temperament was kind and gentle. What kind of person would want to harm him?

Was this an accident, or was someone intentionally getting in his way?

If it was intentional, what about last year, when the Eldest Shixiong sent Xiao-Yue'er to deliver a letter back home? There was still no reply until now, was the letter not delivered, or...

Also... What about Fuyao Mountain?

For a moment, Cheng Qian couldn't help panicking despite his usual calmness, those thoughts entering his mind in this inopportune time.

Because of the Puppet Charm and his panic, his sight went blurry and he lost his balance. Before he could figure things out, blood had risen up his throat.

“Xiao-Qian!”

Li Yun seemed to have called out to him. Cheng Qian abruptly started and struggled to dodge the masked men’s attacks.

The sounds of metal clashing rang in his ears. At this moment, Cheng Qian’s back had been drenched in cold sweat. Mind barely present, he turned his eyes to his Eldest Shixiong in the air. With just one glance, Cheng Qian could tell that he was also struggling hard — with enough numbers, even ants could kill an elephant. Moreover, none of these masked men were weak in the slightest. Yan Zhengming probably hadn’t reached Concretion for long. His ability to stand so steadily on his sword right now might be an exhibition of abnormal ability due to the circumstances.

The clones in the air kept being cut down by the masked men. Yan Zhengming really had his hands full, unable to manage so many things at once. Each time one of the clones were killed, his face would pale further. He also had to constantly keep his Shidi’s safety in mind. He wished he could gain a thousand eyes and limbs [1], or have three heads and six arms [2].

Cheng Qian didn’t want to distract him, so he steeled himself and swallowed the metallic taste in his throat.

This was a terrible feeling. Cheng Qian’s face turned ashen instantly, sword almost falling from his grip. Shuangren seemed like it could sense his weakness too, as it quickly showed signs of turning on him.

While in a daze, Cheng Qian somehow felt as if he was standing on an ancient tumultuous sea. The waters in front of him seemed like they'd come from the desolate and dark Northern Underworld, the chill cutting right into his bones, the silence so palpable it was deafening. A strange vengeful fury suddenly rose in his chest — Why did a weapon that should've been legendary have to be falsely accused by the people? Why must a rare genius with extraordinary talent carry the infamy of the ancestors and successors?

Suddenly, a child's voice rang out from behind him, "Bad people! Stab the bad people! Don't bully my Third Shixiong!"

Something flew past Cheng Qian's ear. With a crisp sound, a Soul-Searching Needle flew toward one of the masked men. The masked man's sword aura had practically torn the fabric covering Cheng Qian's chest, but because of the Soul-Searching Needle, the man retracted his sword to defend himself. Somehow, Cheng Qian's skin was unharmed.

Cheng Qian immediately came back to himself and gasped for breath. He realized that his core had been drained because of Shuangren turning on him. The terrible thing was, he couldn't just toss this sword away, because the masked men had no mercy. More and more of them came forward to attack.

Cheng Qian didn't turn around, but when he reached back, his hand found Shuikeng's head without mistake. He said lightly, "Shh, don't cry. It's alright, save up your Soul-Searching Needles."

The boat can't leave, if it really can't be helped... Cheng Qian raised his face to look at Yan Zhengming, who was almost at his limit, and thought, *Might as well let Eldest Shixiong bring this little one to break through the siege on his sword.*

Bringing Shuikeng out was already difficult for Yan Zhengming, but what about Han Yuan and Li Yun?

Before Cheng Qian could figure things out, he suddenly heard Li Yun's surprised exclaim.

At long last, Yan Zhengming couldn't continue flying on his sword while keeping up so many clones, and abruptly fell from the air. Li Yun hurriedly made a seal with his hands, forming an invisible net above the ground. At least their Sect Leader got to avoid landing on his face.

Yan Zhengming half-knelt on the ground, staggering slightly. For a moment, he didn't even have the strength to stand.

Cheng Qian was forced to act again. He leapt into the air with Han Yuan's shoulder as a step, Shuangren cutting a swift and fierce arch. With this legendary lethal weapon's chilling Qi, he forced the masked men to retreat. His limbs felt like they had been pricked by countless needles, as if his core had been exhausted by charms numerous times — Cheng Qian knew, this meant his meridians had been thoroughly drained.

But in this moment, even if he had been drained, could he retreat?

The taste of iron filled Cheng Qian's mouth as he stabbed Shuangren into the ground, unconcerned with breaking the famed sword. With a sharp sound, Shuangren sent him back into the air. Cheng Qian instinctively struck again, but before he could finish carrying out the sword technique, he could no longer keep moving. The sword aura guarding his body dispersed. Countless weapons pressed down on Shuangren, as if trying to tear him to shreds.

It was too late for the others to save him.

Right then, someone suddenly exclaimed, “Impudent!”

A great surge of energy swept forth, powerful yet gentle, effortlessly cancelling out the attacks toward Cheng Qian in one fell swoop while not harming him the slightest bit.

Cheng Qian’s body suddenly felt light as he fell. Yan Zhengming threw himself forward to catch him.

Yan Zhengming had no idea how he’d reached him in time. When those weapons closed in on Cheng Qian, Yan Zhengming could feel his own heart dropping heavily, as if his insides were about to burst.

Cheng Qian lost consciousness for a brief moment. Fortunately, it didn’t last too long. When his gaze finally regained focus, he found that the masked men filling up the port seemed to have been swept over, a large space cleared up in the middle. Some of the men were crying out in pain not too far away, unable to stand, while others had fallen into the sea.

At the same time, he realized that his hand was still holding onto Shuangren tightly, grip not loosening even on the verge of death.

Cheng Qian was about to climb up, but an arm immediately pressed him back down, leaving no room for argument. Without turning his head, Cheng Qian could hear Yan Zhengming’s heart still racing wildly. He was half-kneeling on the ground, hands trembling as he held on tight to Cheng Qian. Only when Cheng Qian opened his eyes did Yan Zhengming sigh in relief, speaking in a low voice, “Don’t move!”

Tang Wanqiu was laying on the side. She probably hadn’t managed to gain any advantage against Zhou Hanzheng. Her face seemed sickly, so she might have been wounded too.

But even so, when she saw their rescuer, she didn't seem happy in the slightest, instead becoming even more worried. She greeted in a low voice, "Island Lord."

Zhou Hanzheng looked at her coldly, probably thinking that he'd remember the crazy woman's grudge. But when he turned around, his face returned to its pleasant look. He made a great show of moving the Sansi Fan in his hand slowly and cupped his fist with his other hand in greeting toward the Island Lord, who was standing on a gigantic rock, "Greetings to the Island Lord."

The Island Lord didn't even spare him a glance as he turned to Tang Wanqiu, "Wanqiu, bring the kids here. I've made a miscalculation."

Tang Wanqiu said nothing. With her eyes, she signaled for Yan Zhengming to follow her, and went up the stone steps behind the large rock.

Cheng Qian clenched his teeth. He was about to stand with his Eldest Shixiong's shoulder for support, but Yan Zhengming pressed him down again.

And then he realized that he was hovering in midair. His Eldest Shixiong had picked him up in his arms.

Cheng Qian's originally muddled mind was instantly shocked awake. Like a puppy that had fallen from a high place, he scrambled around and grabbed Yan Zhengming's shoulder in panic, worried that his 'delicate' Shixiong would drop him. He probably wouldn't die from the fall, but there was the question of *what* he would land on.

Yan Zhengming had almost been scared to death thanks to him earlier. His face still hadn't smoothed over, clearly agitated as he said sternly, "Stay still!"

Cheng Qian fell silent and went stiff as a rock, allowing Yan Zhengming to move him as he pleased.

The Island Lord's stern face softened slightly. After looking at Yan Zhengming, his eyes turned to Cheng Qian's sword.

The Island Lord's pupils shrunk. He stared at the frost of blood on the sword for a moment, and then turned around. He aimlessly swept his gaze over the place, as if searching for someone. But other than the darkness of the heavens and the sea, and the deadly-looking uneven rocks rising amid them, he found nothing.

The Island Lord retracted his gaze and sighed lightly. The pressuring aura of a formidable master was dispersed, making him look like a gloomy scholar once again. He turned around and said, "Let's go back."

Seeing this, some of the masked men were about to give chase, but Zhou Hanzheng raised his hand to stop them.

With a faint smile, Zhou Hanzheng looked at the Island Lord's back. The words he spoke were cold and threatening, "What kind of man do you think Gu Yanxue is, who do you think you are to go against him? Are you trying to seek death by chasing him?"

Tang Wanqiu hadn't gone far, so she'd heard these words. She gave him a sharp glare and said, "Island Lord, why would you keep this vile person named Zhou, it'd be better to kill him early!"

The Island Lord didn't turn back and continued walking ahead. Hearing those words, he chuckled lightly, his intention unclear.

Speaking of this, some cultivators might not know of the emperor or the prime minister, but none of them would be ignorant of Azure Dragon

Island. All the cultivator sects valued its own people highly. Quite a number of rogue cultivators had only truly begun cultivating from the Azure Dragon Island's Lecture Hall. Not only was the Island Lord's cultivation extremely powerful, he was also referred to as the 'Greatest Master Under the Heavens'.

The common people followed the saying of respecting five things: 'Heavens, Earth, Emperor, Family, and Master'. But cultivators usually had much longer lifespans, so familial relations weren't very important, and thus 'Family' was crossed out. They also refused to bow to the influence of mortal laws, so there was no 'Emperor' to take into account. From those five, only 'Heavens, Earth, and Master' were left. One's cultivation sect was regarded more highly than family. It was easy to figure out the weight of the title 'Greatest Master Under the Heavens'.

If they were to tell others, would anyone believe that the Lord of Azure Dragon Island, the leader of the Four Saints, Gu Yanxue, would look so gloomy and vulnerable?

Among the Four Saints, the Lord of Azure Dragon Island might not have the greatest cultivation, but everyone had always silently acknowledged him as the leader of the Four Saints. Of course, this was done for a reason.

When the group hurried to the main port of Azure Dragon Island, a fierce battle had broken out there.

Turns out, the night patrols and disciples had all gathered here, currently tangled in battle with another party.

The decennial Celestial Market was a great event in the cultivator world, was there any formidable master from any respectable sect who wouldn't be mindful of courtesy? But these visitors had no friendly intentions. The tides were violent on the sea, countless large ships faintly visible on the dark

expanse of the waters. The light emitted from the sword riders twinkled in the sky like stars, billows of waves rising to the heavens.

Looking closely, the rogue cultivators' rumor was true, the figure of a flood dragon could be seen among the approaching crowd!

As if being next to the Island Lord was an assurance of safety, Li Yun finally snapped out of his panic and once again returned to his knowledgeable self. He said, "That's not an Azure Dragon. The Azure Dragon is an ancient celestial beast, why would it appear in the human realm? It's just a flood dragon. Strange, aren't flood dragons only found in Xixing Palace? Why would it be on the East Sea?"

Han Yuan said, "It's probably stolen by some demonic cultivator."

Li Yun paused for a moment and gathered his Qi toward his eyes, gazing into the distance. He said in surprise, "The Panlong Banner — There's the Xixing Palace's Panlong Banner on the boat! But why would Xixing Palace..."

Azure Dragon Island and Xixing Palace were both part of the Ten Great Sects. Xixing Palace was located in a rather secluded place, always emphasizing that they cultivated away from the outside world. They never cared about the affairs outside their sect, and there didn't seem to be any news of a feud, so why would they cross such great distance to stir up trouble at Azure Dragon Island?

Before Li Yun could finish speaking, the Island Lord suddenly whistled. The seemingly invincible flood dragon on the sea instantly fell into the water, producing a large surge of waves that overturned three boats at the same time. Their surrounding abruptly went silent — even the ferocious tides seemed to have been calmed.

Both sides of the conflict stopped involuntarily, the crowd clearing to make way. The Island Lord stepped up and declared aloud, “My good fellows from Xixing Palace, you’ve come here in the dead of night and caused such a stir, I wonder what business you might have?”

A horn was sounded, the densely packed ships on the sea parting away. From the pitch black waters, a large Panlong ship emerged to the surface. An old man whose hair was entirely white stood at the bow of the ship. Even though there was a strange air around him that made him seem like he was waning, his intimidating aura wasn’t affected in the slightest. His gaze was solid as he swept his eyes over the crowd. “Gu Yanxue, a century has passed, but the Lord of Azure Dragon Island is impressive as always.”

The Island Lord frowned slightly and cupped his own hand in greeting, “Bai Ji Daoyou is too generous.”

Yan Zhengming was a rather aloof Sect Leader. Other than looking into important events in the records when he first came to Azure Dragon Island, he didn’t care to take note of other things. When he heard those words, he asked in a low voice, “Who is Bai Ji?”

Li Yun whispered into his ear, “The Master of Xixing Palace. It is said that he’s almost a thousand years old. In the past, people often speculated that he would be the first person in Jiuzhou [3] to achieve the Dao and ascend to immortality. If he can’t ascend, his life force might be exhausted soon.”

Cheng Qian settled his breathing and struggled to push Yan Zhengming away. He stood by himself and asked in curiosity, “Second Shixiong, why do you know so many things?”

“Shut your mouth, it has nothing to do with you.” Yan Zhengming instantly forgot about asking what kind of formidable person Bai Ji was and lowered his head to feel Cheng Qian’s pulse, frowning while checking his wounds.

The two greatest formidable masters' exchange had caused a great stir among the crowd. Some of the rogue cultivators from the Lecture Hall only cared about watching the excitement and were extremely audacious, climbing onto the trees and rocks nearby, looking on and discussing among themselves.

The Island Lord questioned, "If the Xixing Palace is sending people here, why did you not send a message beforehand? Even though our Island is but a barren isolated land, would we fail to understand the common courtesy of hosts? Palace Master Bai, what is your intention, bringing your people here to intrude in this manner?"

The Panlong ship had drawn near in an instant. Bai Ji said, "Of course, this humble person hadn't come here for a simple visit this time. Five years ago, one of my worthless grandsons had left to go on a journey. Hearing that your island's Celestial Market was quite merry, he came here with his fellow cultivators, intending to join in the fun. Afterward, he sent a message back to the palace, saying that he'd seen your island's Lecture Hall and wanted to learn some new things, so he entered the Lecture Hall as a rogue cultivator, and lost contact for the past few years. We all thought that he'd been cultivating on your Island, but a few days ago, my grandson's Life Lamp was suddenly extinguished. I used soul-searching methods to summon his soul back, but I couldn't find it no matter what. And then I realized, he, he..."

When Bai Ji spoke to this point, he choked on a sob and couldn't continue.

Han Yuan frowned as he listened. Unlike his Shixiong, who never cared about the affairs of the outside world, he was the type who would poke his nose into everyone's business. Every single rumor and news on the island would pass through his ears, and he'd never heard that any life had been lost in the Lecture Hall.

With a wave of the Island Lord's hand, a disciple came forward, presenting a book of names with both hands. He asked Bai Ji, "Might I inquire, what is your grandson's true name?"

Bai Ji forcefully suppressed his sorrow and said in a quivering voice, "First part Yan, second part Li."

The Island Lord tossed the book of names into the air, lips moving slightly as he murmured something. The thick book's pages were quickly flipped through from the beginning to the end, never stopping even once, and finally fell with its back facing up.

The disciple said, "Island Lord, no person named Bai Yanli was ever registered in the Lecture Hall."

From not too far away, someone spoke up, "Maybe he used an alias..."

Tang Wanqiu, who was standing in attendance on the side, answered, "Impudent. What kind of place do you think Azure Dragon Island is, to allow entry for some small fry using an alias? If it's not their real surname and given name, it wouldn't appear in the book of names!"

The moment she opened her mouth, everyone around them could sense that something bad was about to happen. As expected, Bai Ji became furious when he heard her. His hair frizzled up as he said, "What are you implying?"

[1] '*gain a thousand eyes and limbs*' The phrase used here is . This is basically a reference to Sahasra-bhuja Sahasra-netra Avalokiteśvara, a

bodhisattva who embodies the compassion of all Buddhas.

[2] ‘*have three heads and six arms*’ The phrase used here is . It means ‘to possess remarkable abilities; to gain superhuman powers’. Originally, the phrase refers to the image of Buddha, who was said to have three heads and six arms (But I think people are more likely to think of Nezha when hearing this phrase now).

[3] ‘*Jiuzhou*’ The word used here is . It’s a poetic name for China, which was a reference to the nine divisions of China in the earliest dynasties.

Some new terms and names:

- Northern Underworld: , the same characters used in ‘Lord Beiming’
- Xixing Palace: (: progress toward the west)
- Panlong: , literally ‘Coiled Dragon’
- Bai Yanli:

Tang Wanqiu wasn't some kind of rich young lady who had never left her house. Even before the Lecture Hall was opened this time, she had spent many years all by herself in the outside world, so she had heard everything about Bai Ji's unsightly deeds — this old man's sect was skilled in the art of beast-taming. Added with those great loaches that they were raising, they had practically become something of a local tyrant in the western area. The indecent old man had taken countless beautiful female cultivators as wives and produced tens of sons and daughters.

But there was a saying, 'Quality is more important than quantity'. Among Bai Ji's many sons and daughters, none of them had managed to be successful. If they hadn't passed away in an accident, their cultivation wasn't good enough, so they'd exhausted their life force. None of them had lived as long as their father, who was practically a turtle at this point. All these years, he had never tried to speak in support of anyone in public.

Now he was crying for his grandson, as if his worries were genuine!

If he couldn't even count on the eyeballs, would he count on the eye sockets?

Tang Wanqiu was angry for many reasons. She was about to fire at Bai Ji verbally, but the Island Lord waved his hand to stop her.

The Island Lord spoke up, elegant and courteous, "This member of my sect is still young, so her words might be insolent. Palace Master, you're a person of great stature, so please don't be offended by this junior. In my

opinion, searching for your grandson should be our priority now. Everyone who has entered the Lecture Hall this time would have their names recorded in the book, so your grandson truly has not entered the Lecture Hall. It isn't impossible that he had been intrigued for some time, but later decided that the cultivation method of our island is unworthy, so he'd left by himself — but since he had come here, someone must have seen him before. Palace Master Bai, if you have your grandson's portrait, I could send the disciples to ask around the island for you."

After hearing those words, Yan Zhengming couldn't help admiring the Island Lord's magnanimity. He wasn't a very good sect leader, so he was often unable to deal with issues appropriately, causing him to always regret his own actions afterward. While pressing Cheng Qian's wrist, he listened to the exchange and offhandedly told Cheng Qian, "If someone had stirred up trouble at the back of our mountain, I most definitely wouldn't try to reason with them and would immediately beat them away, never mind helping them find a person."

Cheng Qian didn't seem to have noticed the self-reflection and disapproval in Yan Zhengming's tone, and simply said in accordance, "They deserve it."

Yan Zhengming glared at him. They regularly build upon their cores to train their meridians, so they were a bit familiar with pulse conditions. He had sensed from Cheng Qian's pulse that other than the outer wounds on his body, he had also suffered some unknown internal injuries. Yan Zhengming was so angry that he mercilessly smacked Cheng Qian's back, snapping, "Why aren't you regulating your breathing, where do you find so much nonsense to spout?"

Cheng Qian, "..."

Where was his conscience? Cheng Qian had only said three words in total.

But before he could argue, a stream of warmth had flowed into him from Yan Zhengming's hand on his back, spreading to his limbs, gently circulating in his body. Cheng Qian couldn't help his eyes drooping, but he still had a juvenile's mentality, so he didn't want to admit that his Eldest Shixiong's care was very comforting, and only murmured, "Meddlesome."

Despite saying that, he finally loosened his fingers around Shuangren, focused on gathering himself, and silently recited the *Scriptures on Clarity and Stillness*.

It is said that one must never hit a smiling person. Against a smiling person of the Island Lord's level, regardless of whether Bai Ji was truly worried for his grandson or if he had ulterior motives, he couldn't possibly act too forceful after hearing those words, so his bluster faltered as he said with reluctant politeness, "Yes. I also ask of the Island Lord to pardon my slight. This old one's sons and daughters have all passed, leaving only this inept grandson behind, I truly..."

The Island Lord shook his head with that gloomy smile of his and said generously, "It is a natural human behavior. Please allow us to see your grandson's portrait so the disciples can ask around. Palace Master Bai might as well stay on the island for now. We are just about to hold a competition to test the disciples' skill, if Palace Master Bai is willing to give some pointers, it would be a great fortune for them."

Let's not mention Bai Ji's status as the honorable Master of Xixing Palace. Even a stubborn, troublesome donkey would have yielded to the Island Lord's words by this point.

Bai Ji lowered his head, eyes turning quickly. Because he had involuntarily been carried away by the Island Lord's words, he couldn't help panicking slightly — Palace Master Bai was a person of great stature. The reason he

had crossed such a great distance to come to the East Sea was most definitely not that grandson of his, whose name he could hardly recall.

Cheng Qian's eyes were closed as he regulated his breathing, but he'd heard everything from the beginning to the end. He was the type who always considered the worst possibilities. This time, he'd contemplated everything carefully and thought, *It definitely won't be solved so easily. If that were the case, why did the Island Lord send us to leave the moment there was an uproar on the island?*

What did the Island Lord know? And who was that shady Zhou Hanzheng supposed to be? Were the masked men all his people? Why didn't the Island Lord find an excuse to get rid of that Zhou Hanzheng earlier?

Also, why did Tang Wanqiu warn them to never mention Fuyao Sect?

And why was Xueqing...

The moment Cheng Qian thought of Xueqing, his heart fell into turmoil. Yan Zhengming, who was helping him regulate his breathing, immediately noticed. Seeing his face suddenly turn pale with cold sweat dripping down his temples, Yan Zhengming became worried that there was something odd with those internal wounds. He immediately lost his ability to keep a straight face and pulled Cheng Qian into his arms, speaking in a low voice, "Xiao-Qian, what is it?"

Cheng Qian was experiencing great pain, but he instinctively knew that this wasn't a good time to talk about their sect affairs. He forcefully swallowed his words and whispered, "I'll tell you when we go back."

Under the Island Lord's persuasion, Bai Ji couldn't find any other way out of the situation, so he pointed at the sky. A cloud of faint white smoke flew out from his fingertips, followed by the faint figure of a young man

appearing in the air. The young man's face was blurry as it floated in the air, his eyes growing and shrinking inconsistently. In any case, it didn't look very much like a person. It was clear that Bai Ji probably couldn't even recall his 'beloved grandson's' face anymore.

Bai Ji's face seemed a bit unpleasant as he forcefully said, "This is my grandson. If any of you have ever seen him, please inform me."

The Island Lord looked at Tang Wanqiu. Tang Wanqiu studied the young man for a moment and shook her head gravely.

The Island Lord said, "Alright. Tomorrow, we will show Bai Daoyou's portrait next to the platform. Be it the disciples or the rogue cultivators of the Lecture Hall, if anyone has seen him, they will naturally speak up. It's quite late now, we should invite the guests to retire for the night."

Seeing that Xixing Palace's attack had been turned into a misfire, the disciples began to put away their weapons.

But right then, a strange development suddenly occurred.

The figure of a person abruptly burst out of the crowd, throwing himself straight at Bai Ji, but was thrown back by Bai Ji's aura of a formidable master. The back of that person's body crashed into a large tree. That person wasn't wearing the white robes of Azure Dragon Island's disciples, so he was most probably a rogue cultivator. His cultivation also wasn't very good, because the impact had wounded him greatly. Using all four of his limbs, he crawled toward Bai Ji, leaving trails of blood on the ground, yelling, "Palace Master, help! Palace Master Bai, I, I know the young master!"

The moment these words were spoken, everyone became startled. Looking at the portrait that Bai Ji had produced, even his own mother might not be able to recognize him, much less a completely unrelated person.

Bai Ji was only using his missing grandson as an excuse, so he was also shocked by these words. He immediately withdrew his pressuring aura and instructed his personal attendant to help the rogue cultivator up. He also stepped forward, feigning joyful surprise as he caught the rogue cultivator's shoulder, "You, what did you say? You've seen Yanli before?"

Under everyone's watchful eyes, the rogue cultivator disregarded the saying 'there is gold under a man's knees' — he fell to his knees and wept, "Bai-xiong [1] has been killed, I'm definitely going to be next!"

The knit between the Island Lord's brows deepened. He came forward to speak, "What is your name? Are you also a cultivator in the Lecture Hall? Don't push yourself to speak, I'll have somebody treat your wounds first."

Before the Island Lord could finish his words, the rogue cultivator was struck with such fear that it seemed like his soul was about to leave his body. The rogue cultivator hurried to crawl behind Bai Ji, repeatedly saying, "Palace Master, help."

His attitude was practically treating the Island Lord like an extremely dangerous beast.

Bai Ji didn't understand the reason for this, but he could faintly sense something going on, so he took advantage of it and said loudly, "What is it, speak up."

The rogue cultivator was shaking so much he could hardly stand. Only after hiding among a circle of Xixing Palace's disciples did he finally speak, voice trembling, "We'd found that on this island, someone was practicing the Ghostism path of demonic cultivation, and was targeting us rogue cultivators who have no backing. Bai-xiong had told me in secret that he was going to investigate this, and then report to the Island Lord. But in the

end... he was devoured by the demonic cultivator's Soul-Consuming Lamp."

Without outstanding cultivation and willpower, how could an ordinary soul last in the lamp? Also, once the soul had been smelted, it would lose the ability to reincarnate, its three immortal souls and seven mortal souls forever becoming another person's puppet. It couldn't even join the cycle of rebirth, and could only await the day it was reduced to dust. Hearing this, Bai Ji finally felt some faint feeling of blood relation and became stunned.

Amid the crowd's shock, Tang Wanqiu had exclaimed before anyone else, "Who is the demonic cultivator you speak of?"

Her booming voice seemed like it could split rocks and shock the heavens. The rogue cultivator screamed and fell on his rear in fright, almost toppling over entirely. He scraped the ground repeatedly and said, words muddled, "Don't kill me, Island Lord, don't kill me... Palace Master Bai, help me!"

These words held so much implied meanings that even Tang Wanqiu had understood. Her eyes immediately sharpened, "You're saying that the Island Lord is the demonic cultivator who takes people's souls? What absolute nonsense!"

But other than her, nobody could be so certain. Before the disciples could do anything, the rogue cultivators had lost their minds. Weren't demonic cultivators supposed to look ghastly and gloomy? Now that they thought about it, the Island Lord's haggard and gloomy look really did... No wonder he was always in seclusion!

Also, when the Celestial Market was just opened, didn't they come across a great demonic cultivator on their way across the East Sea?

Even among demonic cultivators, practitioners of Ghostism were extremely rare. In one thousand and eight hundred years, you might never meet even one of them. So how could there be such a coincidence, that they'd come across one on their way to the Celestial Market?

Since he had appeared nearby, that great demonic cultivator might have been acquainted with some formidable master on the island. He could even be the apparition of a formidable master.

Tang Wanqiu was driven to the end of her patience and said, "You bunch of good-for-nothings, who do you think you are? Even if the Island Lord were to take souls for his cultivation, would he use small fries like you? Wouldn't it be better for him to take me?"

When these words were spoken, the clamor among the crowd instantly went down. Tang Wanqiu's words made sense — with the Island Lord's ability, capturing a cultivator of primordial spirit level would be an easy task, there was no need for him to use a bunch of rogue cultivators whose levels were so low that they couldn't even enter a sect.

Tang Wanqiu was bad with words, but that didn't mean her head was bad. She immediately pressed on, "That brat, do you dare to report your name? Who do you think you are, what proof do you have to say that there is a demonic cultivator on this island? The Lecture Hall opens once in ten days, the fellow cultivators have certainly become familiar with each other. If one of you had vanished suddenly, would nobody notice? Who sent you here to slander our Island Lord? Speak!"

Among the listeners, the sharper ones had already noticed the hint of a hidden scheme.

Cheng Qian had a bad feeling, so he immediately cut off all intrusive thoughts and made use of the time to regulate his breathing. He paid no

heed to the uproar around him and immediately fell into meditation. Yan Zhengming could only stand guard silently to protect him.

As long as Cheng Qian wasn't hurt, and wasn't bleeding, Yan Zhengming looked at his Shidi's blood-stained face, which was so pale that it seemed more jade-like than usual, and couldn't help feeling as if Cheng Qian was made of steel.

The rogue cultivator cried while hiding away, "My cultivation is so insignificant I'm practically an ant, if I had any other choice, how could I dare to frame the Lord of Azure Dragon Island? Don't I care about my own life? You're all great people, you can easily name your status and have good backing, people would be outraged if any of you went missing. But we're all just rogue cultivators with no backing, would anyone care about us?"

Tang Wanqiu looked like she wanted to pick up her sword and stab him into a beehive right there and then, "Pooh, that's just a one-sided statement, do you have any proof?"

The rogue cultivator said, "Of course we do. Bai-xiong said that on one occasion, he had seen the figure of a refined spirit near the Island Lord's place of seclusion, there must be a Soul-Consuming Lamp there!"

The crowd immediately blew up.

This kind of thing was simply unheard of, and this proof was useless even if he'd stated it.

Regardless of whether or not there was a Soul-Consuming Lamp, the Lord of Azure Dragon Island would never allow anyone to search the mountain dwelling where he cultivated in seclusion.

He was the Leader of the Four Saints, the Greatest Master Under the Heavens!

Even if Bai Ji was out of his mind, he wouldn't dare to suggest searching the Island Lord's mountain dwelling, wasn't that preposterous?

Right then, a bright voice spoke in a lively tone, "This fellow cultivator is speaking a lot of nonsense, could it be that you're encouraging everyone on Azure Dragon Island to rebel?"

Everyone turned around and saw Zhou Hanzheng approaching with the raven-like masked men trailing behind him. The masked men's forms weren't very clear when they were flying on their swords, but now that they were walking on the ground, it was easier to see — the group of men were very strict and rigid, all of them possessing similar figure and features.

While Yan Zhengming was watching from the sidelines, he suddenly recalled that back then on the Lecture Hall, Zhou Hanzheng had encouraged Cheng Qian to 'train under his tutelage' — Yan Zhengming couldn't help wondering, which sect did this Zhou person come from, what kind of past did he have?

The moment Zhou Hanzheng raised his hand, all of the masked men behind him halted their steps at the same time. None of them took a single extra step.

He unfolded his fan and moved it in front of his chest, "This humble person has received the Island Lord's grace and become a Protector on this island for years, so I must speak for our Island Lord's innocence now — in order to identify a demonic cultivator who practices Ghostism, you don't need to see their Soul-Consuming Lamp yourself. Those who tread the path of Ghostism will have their souls corrupted. We only need a Soul Mirror to

immediately get our answer. Our Island Lord's light is brilliantly dazzling, how could he have anything to do with those diabolical practices?"

Bai Ji looked at Zhou Hanzheng uncertainly, unable to grasp his intention. When the odd rogue cultivator first appeared, he had already sensed another influential power on this island, so he spoke carefully, "In my knowledge, only one Soul Mirror exists under the heavens, and it's kept in the main hall of the Imperial Palace. Are you suggesting that we should all barge into the Imperial Palace?"

Zhou Hanzheng smiled, "Palace Master Bai has been out of touch with the affairs of the world for a long time — in the reign of the previous emperor, the Soul Mirror had been bestowed to the Office of Heavenly Affairs. This is quite a coincidence. Because of that encounter with the great demonic cultivator on the sea before the last Celestial Market, I've been carrying the mirror on my person just in case."

These words were just like water being poured into boiling oil, that even Tang Wanqiu was stunned, "What, you're from the Office of Heavenly Affairs?"

The Island Lord made no sound. He must have figured out part of it earlier in the secret port, when Zhou Hanzheng was turning on him. But he was good at hiding his thoughts, so the juniors couldn't tell.

The Office of Heavenly Affairs was under the jurisdiction of the Board of Astronomy. It was an entity in the mortal imperial court that was supposed to manage 'cultivators', but in reality, it didn't seem like they could manage anyone. It should make sense that there must be cultivators in the Office of Heavenly Affairs, but in most people's hearts, those still felt like the affairs of two different worlds.

Many people have never seen any personnel of the Office of Heavenly Affairs in the flesh, even until the day they passed or ascended.

Zhou Hanzheng said, unconcerned, “Oh, it’s just an off-handed position. I am a man with no sect or backing to my name, I am no match for everyone here who has powerful backgrounds. I only assumed some empty title to make a living.”

The rogue cultivator hiding behind Xixing Palace cupped his hand with his other in obeisance to Zhou Hanzheng, his form quite pitiful, “The Left Protector is upright and just. If he, too, is unable to tell the good from bad, this junior will accept his fate.”

The rogue cultivator painstakingly straightened his back, his words surprisingly bearing some air of solemn heroicness. Zhou Hanzheng gave him a glance and said nothing as he raised his hand. A masked man immediately came forward, presenting a small package. Inside it was a simple copper mirror, its corners worn, its surface slightly muddy.

Zhou Hanzheng made a seal with his hand and said, “Rise.”

The copper mirror rose into the air, slowly turned around once, and stopped right above his head. The mirror seemed to have produced a ray of light, which fell on the crown of his head, reflecting Zhou Hanzheng’s tall, slender figure.

It was no different from a normal reflection.

Zhou Hanzheng lowered his head for a quick glance and smiled, “It would seem that this humble person’s three immortal souls are whole, and my seven mortal souls are also safe and sound. There is no problem with me.”

Yan Zhengming's heart was racing. He didn't know what kind of part Zhou Hanzheng played in this scheme, but he knew that right now, even though Zhou Hanzheng outwardly seemed to be helping Azure Dragon Island, he was actually causing them harm in secret.

There were many different paths in demonic cultivation. The path of Ghostism in particular was extremely malicious, the most despicable of the most despicable, would the Island Lord subject himself to that?

If this had happened in the past, Yan Zhengming wouldn't have believed it even if he were beaten to death. But ever since the rogue cultivator made his accusation, Yan Zhengming realized that the Island Lord hadn't said a single word, so he couldn't help feeling anxious.

When he first met Jiang Peng, he was still very young, so his impression of that time was bone-deep. Even now, he was still deeply disgusted by everyone who practiced Ghostism. The Island Lord had protected their sect for so long, if he really were...

Yan Zhengming turned to look at the Island Lord. For a moment, he didn't know what he was supposed to do.

He then looked at Cheng Qian, who didn't seem to have heard any of the happenings around him, his focus impregnable. Yan Zhengming couldn't help admiring him in secret.

The Island Lord said nothing for a while. The crowd around him had started discussing among themselves. Yan Zhengming looked at the Soul Mirror, which seemed as if it had penetrated through time to appear in the present, and suddenly thought — Wen Ya Zhenren said that in each generation of Fuyao Sect, one evildoer was bound to appear. What if in their generation, too, someone were to be led astray?

This thought only crossed his mind briefly, but it had struck Yan Zhengming's heart, causing him to feel as if something was lodged in his throat. His gaze swept toward Li Yun, Han Yuan, and Shuikeng. Li Yun was smart and cautious — so cautious, in fact, that he was a bit cowardly. He didn't seem like the type to overstep the norms. Han Yuan's commitment toward cultivation couldn't compare to his enthusiasm toward digging up dirt on everyone around them. Shuikeng... ah, even though she was still very young, she had already shown signs of being a nitwit.

At last, he involuntarily turned to Cheng Qian.

Bloodstains marred Cheng Qian's face, but he looked extremely tranquil in his meditation.

Yan Zhengming only considered this possibility briefly, but his heart seemed to have been seized without mercy. He stared at Cheng Qian blankly for a long time. And then he, the least steadfast sect leader in history, silently thought to himself, *What use is it to think about this? Even if Xiao-Qian were to really come to that point, I will never act against him. If worse comes to worst, I'll hide him away.*

[1] '*Bai-xiong*' The phrase used here is . (xiong) usually means 'elder brother; elder male relative of the same generation', but it can also be used as a courteous form of address between male friends, which is somewhat similar to (ge). The difference between using '-ge' and '-xiong' is, '-ge' is a friendly term of address for *older* male acquaintances, so it is specifically used for older friends, while '-xiong' does not address the difference in seniority.

In conclusion: Two male friends can use ‘-xiong’ for each other, but if person A uses ‘-ge’ for person B, person B can’t use ‘-ge’ for person A (unless they’re teasing and being playful with each other, I guess).

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Unfortunately, while Sect Leader Yan was extremely conflicted regarding his feelings, Cheng Qian knew nothing of it.

At the moment, he had only put up an act of being unaffected by the surroundings. In their group, they had three out of four from the saying ‘old, young, sick, and crippled’. Cheng Qian wasn’t a person with a peaceful heart, how could he fully meditate under these circumstances?

He’d only had a few chances to meet the Island Lord, and he was naturally the type to be suspicious of everyone, so he couldn’t trust that easily. At the moment, while making use of the time to regulate his breathing, he made some space in his mind to listen to the surroundings and thought, *Seeing this bewildering situation, they might break into a fight again. We’d better mingle in with the rogue cultivators — the rogue cultivators on Azure Dragon Island were all over the place, so these formidable masters might not pay much attention. We might be able to make use of the chaos to escape.*

And then he thought, *If that can’t be done... Then we’ll have to fight. At worst, I’ll die here. If I could hold these people off for the others, even just a little, I’d be able to rest in peace.*

After coming to this conclusion, he somehow stopped worrying about everything. His core, which had been stagnating inside him, also eased out of its state.

Amid the crowd's anxiety, the Island Lord finally spoke up, explaining, "Tens of years ago, I'd fought a great foe with some fellow cultivators. My soul had been damaged, so I've been cultivating in seclusion to recover. What exactly does everyone want to see?"

Bai Ji pressed on persistently, "So Island Lord Gu does not plan to show your reflection on this mirror now?"

The Island Lord looked at him coolly. An exhausted look crossed his face for a moment as he sighed, "If you truly want to frame me, you will find an excuse no matter what, even if it was such a preposterous crime — Palace Master Bai, you can choose whether or not you trust me. This humble person has never seen your grandson, and I most definitely have never had a Soul-Consuming Lamp. As for demonic cultivation..."

He laughed coldly in a low voice, the sound carrying a hint of mockery, as if he no longer wanted to go along with this farce.

Zhou Hanzheng raised his brows slightly, clapping his fan against his palm, "Let me say something for the sake of justice. Saying that someone like the Island Lord is a practitioner of Ghostism is frankly laughable — in the great battle tens of years ago, one of the Four Saints had died while the remaining three were injured. It truly was a vicious fight. Since the Island Lord had explained about his damaged soul and the reason he'd been cultivating in seclusion, I think we don't need to use this Soul Mirror anymore. I believe his words, in any case."

As Zhou Hanzheng spoke, he made a pinching gesture with his fingers to return the Soul Mirror. Bai Ji, who had been pushing the Island Lord earlier, was instantly left standing alone. It was as if Zhou Hanzheng was truly a fair man of justice!

Bai Ji felt so awkward that his face instantly turned red. From behind, he could hear someone laughing coldly, “Could it be, Old Man Bai’s life force has almost been exhausted. Looking for your grandson is a lie, you’re actually trying to ascend through any possible means, aren’t you?”

Bai Ji exploded in fury, “Who is it? Get out here!”

A group of people stepped forward in response, a middle-aged man standing at the forefront. His demeanor was cool, his bearing giving off the impression that he wasn’t someone to be messed with. He looked scornfully at the surroundings, as if he was looking at various states of dog manure, and finally turned to the Lord of Azure Dragon Island. “I am Tang Yao from Mulan Mountain. The head disciple of my sect, Tang Zhen, has been missing for a century. Recently, I heard that there was news of him in this place, so I’ve come to drop by. I wasn’t able to greet the Island Lord before this, please pardon my slight.”

Tang Wanqiu was stunned the moment she saw the newcomer. After a long while, she finally spoke slowly, “... Sect Leader?”

On behalf of their being from the same sect, Tang Yao looked at her condescendingly. He wasn’t particularly friendly either, only nodding at her lightly.

Tang Yao and Bai Ji seemed like they had arranged beforehand to look for their people on Azure Dragon Island. One of the parties involved was her own sect, so even if Tang Wanqiu had left the sect for so many years, she couldn’t help feeling stuck in the middle.

Zhou Hanzheng said derisively, “How fascinating. Has the Azure Dragon Island become a place to find missing people?”

The people of Mulan Mountain might have been naturally straightforward and to the point. Hearing those words, Tang Yao said expressionlessly, “I’m not here to find him. It’s just that recently, someone had sent a letter to Mulan Mountain, saying that they had sighted Tang Zhen’s primordial spirit around the East Sea. I don’t know who would have such a noble heart, that they would be so concerned with another sect’s member after more than a hundred years. Does Master Zhou have any thoughts on this?”

Zhou Hanzheng said mildly, “Of course, there are always righteous people.”

“Righteous? I’ve only ever heard of the saying ‘The fall of the Great Dao causes the necessity of righteousness, the rise of intelligence causes the existence of deception’.” Tang Yao, whose stance in the conflict was a mystery, did not give Zhou Hanzheng any face as he spoke. He turned to the Island Lord and said, “Gu Daoyou, I have never interacted with you, but this unworthy disciple of mine has become your ally and received your care for so many years. I’ve come this time to inform you of one thing — we had originally come to the East Sea to look for information, but happened to hear a rumor. It is said that the demonic cultivator the Four Saints had fought back then was a Lord Beiming, and the demon lord had a mystical stone in his possession that ended up on Azure Dragon Island afterward.”

Tang Yao didn’t consider the Island Lord’s face as he continued, “They said that you had been injured by the demon lord and should have long since died, that you had only been surviving because of that mystical stone and become an arrow at the end of its flight for so many years. Palace Master Bai must have heard of this too, and has come today for that stone?”

Bai Ji didn’t expect to be seen through so completely, so he became enraged due to his shame, “Absolute nonsense!”

Tang Yao, “Palace Master Bai naturally knows whether it is truly just nonsense. I heard that the mystical stone had otherworldly abilities and was

called the ‘Wish-Granting Stone’. It could produce miraculous effects, so improving one’s cultivation was most definitely within its capability. What is it, Palace Master Bai has been living for so long, are you worried about your life force now? Why don’t you consider what kind of item it must be, to be under the possession of the great demon of Beiming!”

Zhou Hanzheng said meaningfully, “Sect Leader Tang, are you trying to say that the Island Lord’s survival is reliant on a demonic stone? This... this isn’t a very good thing to say.”

Yan Zhengming felt extremely anxious listening to Tang Yao and Zhou Hanzheng’s words. The others might not know the whole story, but he knew of Lord Beiming’s origins. That said, he only knew that in the Fuyao Sect, there was a senior who had fallen into devious paths — when was there ever a demonic artifact?

When he thought deeper about this, Yan Zhengming felt cold sweat drenching his back. It felt as if they had been exploited and added to the list of casualties.

But the Island Lord didn’t reply, saying instead, “Master Zhou, you have concealed your identity on my Azure Dragon Island for decades, you must have quite a great scheme in your plans.”

He completely avoided answering all of Zhou Hanzheng and Tang Yao’s prodding and questioning, but for everyone else, he had practically admitted to it.

Seeing the change in direction, Bai Ji immediately said, “Gu Yanxue, you’ve been relying on a demonic artifact to survive, is your title as one of the Four Saints also gained by deceiving the people?”

The rogue cultivator's voice was even louder, "The cultivation method of a sect has always been a secret kept away from outsiders. Island Lord Gu is the only person who would accept rogue cultivators every ten years, do you think he was really such a generous person, do you think he was really just showing kindness out of true benevolence? Stop dreaming, who in the world would have that much kindness to give!"

When he reached the end of his words, the rogue cultivator's voice broke into a sob. Amid the sound of the waves behind them, his hoarse voice made the bystanders feel a strange sympathy usually shared with a like-minded person in distress. The flood dragon, which had originally been subdued, was agitated once again and seemed about to break through the water. The disciples of Azure Dragon Island and Xixing Palace raised their weapons again, but this time, the rogue cultivators on Azure Dragon Island simultaneously backed off, fully alert.

It was unknown who had struck first, and it was unclear just how many different parties there were on the island. Everything fell into chaos instantly.

At that moment, a strange low buzz was heard from an unknown place. Among the rogue cultivators who had originally retreated, tens of them suddenly burst out of the crowd. These people were extremely strange, all of them unfearing of death as they went straight for the people of Xixing Palace.

The rogue cultivators' cultivation weren't very high. The one at the forefront was instantly struck by Bai Ji's personal attendant and reduced to smithereens.

But right then, a frightening thing occurred.

The rogue cultivator's innards became a bloody mist, splattering everywhere, but the dismembered body parts continued moving forward, like a possessed marionette.

Though the sword cultivator from Xixing Palace was quite powerful, he had never seen this kind of spectacle, so he immediately took three steps back in shock.

Looking closer, these rogue cultivators' eyes were bright red. There were visible clouds of dark energy behind them, fangs bared and claws brandished.

Bai Ji exclaimed in shock and anger, "Gu Yanxue, what kind of excuses can you give!"

Before he could finish his words, the rogue cultivator who had been speaking vehemently earlier suddenly let out an inhuman howl. His entire person had burst open from the chest, his skin split open inch by inch, exposing the blood vessels and veins underneath. The bloody man struck at Bai Ji from behind with his bare hands.

Bai Ji had been cultivating for almost a thousand years, of course he wouldn't be struck so easily. He turned his hand and produced a palm-sized demon-vanquishing club from his sleeve. He swung the club twice, lengthening it to about the height of a man, and mercilessly stabbed it through the top of the bloody man's head, nailing him in place.

But the bloody man was not killed. Even after being skewered, he still struggled ceaselessly. After a moment, he suddenly blew himself up, turning himself into countless pieces of bloodied flesh covered in dark aura.

Screams immediately sounded from everywhere in the crowd. Those pieces of bloodied flesh were lethally poisoned and mustn't be touched.

Zhou Hanzheng's expression changed, "This is the Soul-Painting Art of demonic cultivation. It places an invisible charm onto other people's souls without their notice, and makes them obey anything the Soul-Painter orders."

The moment these words were spoken, a large space was immediately cleared out around the Island Lord. Even the disciples of Azure Dragon Island were looking at him uncertainly — among the current formidable masters, other than the Four Saints, who could have had the ability to draw invisible charms?

Tang Yao seemed to have been waiting for these words. He turned to the Island Lord, brandishing his long sword. Fine sparks had formed on the blade, the result of his core's concretion.

Tang Yao said, "Island Lord Gu, how would you explain this?"

The Island Lord laughed bitterly, "This is beyond justification."

Tang Yao asked, "So the mystical stone really is in your possession?"

He finally showed his true intentions. Even though he'd concealed his thoughts carefully, he was still aiming for the stone after all.

But someone refused to understand the situation. Tang Wanqiu immediately came forward to stand next to the Island Lord and said stubbornly, "Sect Leader, I guarantee with my life, the Island Lord can't be a demonic cultivator, and most definitely can't be coveting a demonic artifact!"

"Shut your mouth," Tang Yao roared in a low voice, "Tang Wanqiu, you've become more and more impudent. Even if you've completed your apprenticeship, you're still a part of Mulan Mountain, do you intend to turn on your own seniors?"

Tang Wanqiu's eyes widened hearing the shameless ill will. At this moment, no matter how she tried to deceive herself, she still understood: Even though the Sect Leader of Mulan Mountain spoke more dignified words than Zhou Hanzheng, his true intentions were even more malicious.

Tang Wanqiu turned pale. After a long moment of silence, she spoke haltingly, "Then... Then I ask of the Sect Leader to expel me from the sect."

The Island Lord sighed, "To be famous in this world is to fool everyone under the heavens. It's alright, Wanqiu, you don't need to do this."

Tang Wanqiu clenched her teeth and remained unmoved.

The Island Lord was about to speak again, but he heard Zhou Hanzheng speaking slowly amid the sea of carnage, "I still don't believe it, could the Island Lord be the type to keep things unlawfully? Sect Leader Tang, how did you learn that the mystical stone was on Azure Dragon Island? Couldn't it have been destroyed with the great demon lord? Have you figured out the true origins of that Lord Beiming?"

The moment these words were spoken, the Island Lord's demeanor finally changed. His figure seemed to have grown, his hand striking toward Zhou Hanzheng. The temperate man who had always seemed tired was finally angered, "Who are you working for?"

Zhou Hanzheng miserably dodged the attack, speaking with half-genuine alarm, "I'm clearly trying to defend the Island Lord, what is the meaning of this?"

Tang Yao butted in and placed himself in between Zhou Hanzheng and the Island Lord, "What, are you about to kill the witness to prevent your secrets being exposed?"

While these formidable masters began to exchange blows, the utterly confused Yan Zhengming could hear the Island Lord's voice speaking in his ear, urging him, "Take your Shidi and mingle in with the rogue cultivators. Hurry and leave in the confusion. From now on, don't ever mention Fuyao Mountain, much less your Shizu — you know nothing!"

Amid the bright flashes of lightning and fire, Yan Zhengming's muddled brain finally figured out something — Zhou Hanzheng clearly knew of Fuyao Sect and Lord Beiming's history, this was a threat.

If the Island Lord refused to admit that the stone was in his possession, Zhou Hanzheng was going to bring up the fact that Lord Beiming was originally from the Fuyao Sect. If the stone wasn't in the Four Saint's possession, of course it was in Fuyao!

With this kind of wish-granting artifact, just the slightest bit of suspicion could get you in great trouble, would anyone care whether you were innocent or guilty?

Witnessing the carnage in front of him, Yan Zhengming felt like he had become a prey among predators, danger lurking and waiting to pounce no matter where he turned.

Despite his fear, he knew that at this moment, he should pick Xiao-Qian up and take everyone in his sect out of here. But how could he leave the Island Lord here without being weighed down by his own conscience?

For a moment, Yan Zhengming remained frozen in place, unable to decide.

The Island Lord suddenly exclaimed, "Tang Wanqiu!"

Hearing this, Tang Wanqiu looked like she had been struck by lightning. Her complexion shifted a few times, and at last, she clenched her teeth and

turned to Yan Zhengming, "I'll escort you all, go."

Yan Zhengming, "But..."

Tang Wanqiu's eyes sharpened, "Why are you stalling? The affairs of the previous generation had nothing to do with you, don't be a hindrance here!"

Li Yun was quicker to think, so the things that would occur to Yan Zhengming, he would most definitely consider. At this moment, his only fear was their Sect Leader tactlessly trying to act the hero, so he hurried to exclaim, "Eldest Shixiong, Xiao-Qian is injured, Shimei is still very young... Listen to the senior!"

Yan Zhengming turned to him in a daze. Right then, he heard the Island Lord's voice in his ear again, speaking without any room for argument, "I'll send you off."

The Island Lord, who was fighting viciously with Tang Yao in the air, abruptly spat out a small colorful pot. Tang Yao was surprised. He saw that things didn't look right and immediately tried to back off, but it was too late. A typhoon was kicked up around the pot, indiscriminately sweeping over everyone on the ground, as if a wind dragon had risen.

There was a buzzing sound in Yan Zhengming's ear. Before he could react, he had been dragged into the whirlwind. Countless shouts were mixed in with the sounds of the wind as he was carried off into the distance. He didn't know how far he had gone, nausea coming over him and causing his head to throb.

The next moment, Yan Zhengming felt pressure around his waist. A long piece of cloth had come toward him, coiling around his middle. Yan Zhengming was dragged off by the mysterious force and fell onto the ground again. When he struggled to open his eyes, he saw that the other end

of the cloth was held in Tang Wanqiu's hand. Afterward, Tang Wanqiu tossed another person his way. Yan Zhengming reflexively caught that person and saw that it was Cheng Qian, whose complexion didn't look very good.

"The Island Lord couldn't trust anyone else and told me to send you off. Since he had entrusted this task to me, I must fulfill this responsibility," Tang Wanqiu said, "Get up and go."

Li Yun urged him in a soft voice, "Eldest Shixiong, let's hurry."

Yan Zhengming couldn't help looking at Cheng Qian, who had gotten to his feet with the sword in his hand for support. Regulating his breathing must have returned some of his strength. He met Yan Zhengming's gaze and didn't speak much, only saying simply, "I'll listen to you, you decide."

Fierce winds and dark clouds rolled over the island. The Island Lord's wind dragon had sent them out to a great distance. Looking from afar, the Island Lord's form was hidden amid countless roars, so they couldn't even see his figure anymore. Yan Zhengming's heart ached so much that it felt as if there was a raging sea inside him.

At this moment, he finally realized that 'return to Fuyao Mountain and cultivate away from the world' was only a dream, an unreachable idea that he'd had while he knew nothing of the outside world.

The tides of the world were constantly turning. Even someone like the Island Lord had to resign to going with the tide, how could they ever hope to compete?

Why must the path of cultivation be so difficult?

"Go," Yan Zhengming said in a low voice, "Let's go."

But where should they go?

Their group carefully followed Tang Wanqiu and passed through the hills and forests. The yells and sounds of violence slowly faded into the distance.

When they reached the shore, Tang Wanqiu tossed the tattered strip of cloth into the air. The cloth grew in size until it was several meters long and hovered in midair. She motioned for them to get on, saying, "Finding a boat is impossible, you can only leave this way. My cultivation isn't that great, this strip of cloth can't last for long, so it can't directly send you across the sea. Find an uninhabited island nearby to rest for a while. Figure out a way after the danger has passed."

Yan Zhengming's throat tightened, "Senior, what about you?"

"I have places I need to be," Tang Wanqiu turned toward the center of Azure Dragon Island, "Sect Leader Yan, you don't need to be troubled. The Island Lord isn't doing it for you all. That Zhou person had infiltrated the Azure Dragon Island for so many years, and there were also those cultivators who had been caught with the Soul-Painting art... which means that someone had deliberately schemed against him, the Greatest Master Under the Heavens. He'd told me that no matter what, I must send you all out of this place safely. The Island Lord's life force had almost been exhausted, so he wouldn't have been able to live for much longer. But as long as he was alive, he would continue to fulfill his promise to his old friend and keep protecting you all."

Tang Wanqiu rolled up her sleeves and brought Han Yuan, Zheshi, and Shuikeng onto the tattered cloth, "From now on, there is nobody to protect you. Look out for yourselves."

Afterward, Tang Wanqiu jumped onto her worn out sword and paid them no further attention. She charged straight into the battle and disappeared

completely.

Other female cultivators were usually referred to as ‘female celestials’. Even if a female celestial were to become so downtrodden that she’d lost her flowing white silks, she must still have her red hair string. But Tang Wanqiu could only procure a tattered strip of cloth, which she might have used as a waistband usually.

Cultivators weren’t affected by the impurities of the world, their marrows and bones cleansed from any filth. Even if they weren’t so beautiful that they could cause the fall of a city, they were all quite pleasing to the eyes. But she was an outlier, with her messy brows and face of a debt collector.

She did not know her own limitations and often offended other people. Each time she spoke, she would definitely speak of the things that shouldn’t be spoken of...

Perhaps, other than being strong, Tang Zhenren really had no other saving grace.

The deep blue sea was boundless, the heavens and the stars desolate and sparse.

The meeting and separation of people was sudden and unbidden, like forsaken drifters wandering without aim.

Tang Zhenren's waistband had a hole in it, which she never bothered to mend. At this moment, the sea wind kept passing through the hole mercilessly. The salty breeze caused Yan Zhengming's slightly disheveled long hair to keep whipping at his face. He could only feel that this place was a land of foul winds and muddy waves, the boundaries of the space impossible to grasp.

Shuikeng had fallen asleep in Zheshi's arms. Han Yuan silently sat hugging his knees at the side, on the verge of falling asleep. Li Yun couldn't help asking in a low voice, "Eldest Shixiong, where should we go from now on?"

Hearing this, Yan Zhengming inhaled deeply and forcefully pinched the space between his eyebrows. There were dark circles under his eyes. Truth be told, he was even more at a loss than Li Yun was.

Everyone else kept coming to him to ask about their future, but who could he turn to?

Yan Zhengming felt that he might not be able to live up to the seal of the sect leader hanging in front of his chest. Maybe he really wasn't meant to

be a sect leader. Thinking back on the past twenty years, if he wasn't going with the tide, he was being forced to move forward by the others. If there was nobody to push him or pull him forward, he wouldn't know what to do, where to go.

Seeing his depressed face, Li Yun tugged at him, "Eldest Shixiong?"

"Rest first," Yan Zhengming came back to himself and said in a soft, comforting voice, "It's fine, don't worry... If there's really nowhere to go, we can go back to the Yan house temporarily for shelter."

The moment these words were spoken, Cheng Qian also turned.

In all honesty, for Cheng Qian, if they weren't going to return to Fuyao Mountain, there wasn't much difference whether they'd gone to stay in the Yan house or some other place to beg for alms. He didn't have much of an opinion originally, but he couldn't stay silent at that moment — if Xueqing had also been met with misfortune, Xiao-Yue'er and the others might have been intercepted on the way too. Then, did the powerful and wealthy Yan family... still exist?

Cheng Qian hesitated for a moment and spoke up, "Shixiong..."

Looking at Yan Zhengming's expression, he couldn't help hesitating.

On one hand, Cheng Qian understood that his Eldest Shixiong must know about this. But upon seeing his exhaustion, Cheng Qian couldn't help keeping the words at the tip of his tongue, unable to bring himself to speak.

Yan Zhengming forced himself to gather his composure, putting on a nonchalant face, "What is it, Tong Qian?"

Cheng Qian observed him carefully, gaze somewhat avoiding.

At first, Yan Zhengming's heart was warmed by this rare display of softness, but then he sensed that something wasn't right, and immediately had a bad feeling.

As expected, the next moment, Cheng Qian lowered his voice and said, "I'm going to tell you something, don't be too sad, okay?"

Cheng Qian very rarely showed such courteousness. Yan Zhengming's breath was stuck in his throat.

Cheng Qian clenched his teeth, steeled himself, and said quickly, "The Puppet Charm that I gave to Xueqing-ge was broken."

Zheshi's hand trembled, almost causing him to drop Shuikeng. Han Yuan raised his face with a dazed look. Li Yun paused for a moment before gasping violently.

But Yan Zhengming only stared at Cheng Qian blankly, remaining silent for a long time.

Cheng Qian was worried that he couldn't handle the news and immediately added, "It doesn't necessarily mean that something bad has happened, don't think about the worst possibilities for now."

Even he himself could feel the guilt weighing on his conscience when he said these words. With that guilt, the following words that he was about to say were also forgotten. Cheng Qian was good at dampening people's mood, but he didn't know how to comfort them. He could only say clumsily, "Maybe he'd lost it by mistake, or maybe it had been broken in someone else's possession..."

“Nn, you’re right,” Yan Zhengming looked like he’d only just come back to himself. He forced a smile and went along with Cheng Qian’s words, “Maybe he’d encountered a storm on the sea. That Puppet Charm of yours might have saved his life... Ugh...”

Without warning, he shuddered violently. And then he started coughing into his hand, as if he’d been choked by the sea wind.

Cheng Qian opened his mouth, but he didn’t know what to say, so he experimentally placed a hand on Yan Zhengming’s shoulder. He could feel some warmth permeating from his Eldest Shixiong’s body, but before he could come in contact with it, that sensation had been dispersed by the sea wind. Sometimes, Cheng Qian would think back to his first time meeting his Eldest Shixiong, with his form and bearing which had been girly and not masculine at all. So in his mind, he often thought of Yan Zhengming as the wastrel who’d spent his time lazing around in the Land of the Tender.

Back then, Yan Zhengming had no calluses on his hands, he had no worries on his mind. What wonderful days those were...

All this misery of wandering in a foreign place and the fear of helplessness, why must they be burdened on him?

Before Cheng Qian could finish mourning for these troubling times, the winds on the sea had changed suddenly.

Without warning, the entire surface of the sea seemed to shake violently. Large waves came out of nowhere, rising like walls of water about six *zhang* high, coming at them one after another.

The originally calm sea wind suddenly turned fierce. Tang Wanqiu’s hole-ridden waistband shook violently, wobbling as if on the verge of falling as it rose higher, but it didn’t seem to have enough power to do this. Halfway

through, there was the sound of ripping silk — the waistband was torn in two from where the hole was!

The tearing point was right under Cheng Qian's feet. He lost his footing and immediately fell from the waistband. At that moment, Yan Zhengming reacted in time and immediately grabbed Cheng Qian's arm. The mouthful of blood that he'd coughed into his hand earlier instantly stained Cheng Qian's body.

On reflex, Cheng Qian held onto Shuangren and manipulated his core subconsciously. In this critical moment, the sword produced a slight metallic clang. The sound was instantly drowned in the roars of the waves, but Cheng Qian had definitely heard it. His heart stirred. For a moment, he didn't know whether to laugh or cry — this was clearly a reaction from Concretion!

Cheng Qian, "Eldest Shixiong, let me go!"

Yan Zhengming refused to listen. He had been in emotional turmoil right before this, so at the moment, there seemed to be an obstacle set up by a demon in his mind. The only thought in his head was he must never loosen his grip.

In this crucial moment, Cheng Qian didn't have the time to argue and quickly recited the chant for sword-riding in his heart. Perhaps he had really reached the level of attainment, or maybe he had been pushed by the urgency of the situation, but in that instant, he completely skipped the considerable step in between Concretion and sword-riding, and somehow made Shuangren hover unsteadily in the air.

The weight in Yan Zhengming's hand was relieved, so he finally snapped out of it. He recomposed himself and immediately loosened his grip to prevent outside interference for Cheng Qian. "No... Don't force yourself,

move over here slowly, slower. You can't fly steadily right now, slow down some more."

Cheng Qian naturally wouldn't dare to be careless. Achieving Concretion with your sword was equivalent to turning your sword into a part of your own body. Even when standing on a flat plane, anyone would trip quite a few times if they suddenly grew another leg — moreover, Shuangren wasn't a particularly well-behaved sword, and Cheng Qian couldn't fully control it.

Cheng Qian steadily kept his core in check and didn't dare to let his mind wander the slightest bit. He slowly manipulated Shuangren to move closer to Tang Wanqiu's waistband, but right when Yan Zhengming could almost reach out to catch him, another unforeseen event took place.

A pillar of water suddenly burst out of thin air, bringing with it a large surge of waves. When it came down on them, the sea water seemed to contain an indescribable force. Cheng Qian's chest felt suffocated, his breath stuck inside him. He lost control over Shuangren and was flung away with the sword.

The surprised exclamation in his ear was instantly drowned out. Cheng Qian only had enough time to grab the hilt of his sword before falling into the sea. Afterward, he was struck by the waves crashing down from above and immediately lost consciousness.

Fortunately, he never loosened his fingers around the sword. Shuangren's scabbard was lost in the water, and when the blade was blown away by the waves, it struck Cheng Qian's body and opened a cut on his calf. The sea water stung the wound, and Cheng Qian was forced awake by the pain.

He choked on a few mouthfuls of water and immediately held his breath, struggling with all his might.

Cheng Qian had always claimed to not fear life and death, but he had no desire to meaninglessly drown in the sea like this.

Unfortunately, he wasn't particularly good at swimming, which was quite a disgrace for the Tide Swordplay he often used. In the small streams on the land, he could still flail about for a bit, but he truly couldn't do much in the great waves of the sea.

With trembling hands, Cheng Qian made a seal that he wasn't very familiar with. A thin bubble formed around him, unsteadily encapsulating him inside, but these waves could rip Tang Zhenren's waistband in two, so the efforts from his almost-spent core stood no chance at all.

The bubble repeatedly formed itself, but was shattered by the sea water each time. Every time the bubble was broken, Cheng Qian would choke on quite a few mouthfuls of water. Gradually, his consciousness began to dim. He didn't know how long he'd struggled, but at last, he could only float along, unable to keep fighting.

Cheng Qian could only feel the coldness.

The sword was cold, the water was also cold. It was so chilling that his senses were fading out.

Cheng Qian couldn't help thinking back to his childhood years, when he'd seen a funeral procession for the old man next door — it felt like a lifetime ago. The old widow had sewn a set of thick burial clothes for the old man, stuffing it full with the cotton that they'd collected for more than two years. After this experience, a deep impression toward death was formed in Cheng Qian's mind for the first time.

He thought, death must be extremely cold.

But this time, Cheng Qian didn't manage to die.

When he opened his eyes again, the sun was setting on another day.

Cheng Qian sat up quickly. The back of his waist stung sharply in pain, almost causing him to lie back down. He then realized that he was currently on top of a large reef. The sword wound on his calf had turned white from being exposed to the sea water, causing the two sides of the cut to curl back hideously. A pale white frost of salt had formed on the bare skin.

Someone spoke from behind him, "Still alive?"

Cheng Qian turned around and saw a 'savage man' sitting in meditation behind him.

That person was in even worse condition than Cheng Qian, his tattered clothes barely covering his body. His beard and hair were also disheveled, only showing the pair of eyes on his face. His gaze felt like lightning as he stared at Cheng Qian. Somehow, this person felt a bit familiar. After thinking for a long time, Cheng Qian finally exclaimed in shock, "You're... Wen Ya Zhenren?"

Wen Ya glared at him and snapped in anger, "Have your eyes gone bad or have you lost your memory, why are you yelling?"

Cheng Qian's temples throbbed in pain, as if there were needles digging into his head. Meeting an old acquaintance here, thousands and thousands of words came to the tip of his tongue — regarding Master, Shixiong, the Island Lord, Tang Zhenren... but only for a moment. Afterward, he wiped off the vulnerabilities that must never exist and regained his composure.

Cheng Qian put those words away and swallowed them back with the bitter saltiness of the sea water, respectfully making an obeisance to Wen Ya

Zhenren the way a junior should. Then he put Shuangren aside wordlessly and sat to regulate his breathing, recovering his exhausted core as quickly as possible.

Wen Ya looked him over for a moment and couldn't help showing some admiration on his face, thinking, "Xiao-Chun told me that this boy might be the reincarnation of his master. Looking at him this way, there really are some similarities."

He silently stayed to guard Cheng Qian until midnight, when the star-filled sky hung over the deep blue sea. The tides had receded slightly, exposing a large part of the reef's form.

The moment Cheng Qian came back to himself, he heard Wen Ya Zhenren speak, "That 'Sword of Miserable Death' is rebellious and unruly, it's not something that could be tamed just by learning about it and reasoning. You must have realized this too."

Cheng Qian was stunned for a moment, and then he reacted, "Senior, you're the one who'd left this sword in my room?"

Wen Ya laughed coldly, "Who else could it be? Thanks to the misfortune from your sect, that run-down seaside inn of mine couldn't even keep running because I'm related to you all, and I even have a flock of bastards trying to hunt me down. I was planning to return the thing that your sect had entrusted in my care and lay low until everything has passed. Heh, funnily enough, arriving at the right time is better than arriving early, and I got here just in time for the great battle on Azure Dragon Island."

Cheng Qian, "This sword was my master's?"

Wen Ya snorted, "Bullshit. How could a soft person like your master ever hope to use a lethal weapon like this? It was your Shizu's. Many years ago,

it had happened to end up in my possession. At the time, your sect's people were either disabled or too young, there was nobody to entrust this sword to, so I've been holding onto it — if the wielder of this sword possesses a steadfast and immovable heart, the sword will be able to unleash immense power. But if the wielder shows the slightest bit of weakness, the sword will strike back against them. It's the number one object in the world that goes with the saying 'take advantage of the weak and fear the strong'. The quality of your sect keeps dropping with each generation, and yours in particular is even more unbearable to look at. If one must choose from your group of wastrels, you would be the only one who stood a chance against it."

Those words gave Cheng Qian a funny feeling. Somehow, he felt that this senior of his was quite good at idle chatter. He immediately got to his feet and bid his farewell, "Many thanks for Senior's assistance. I still need to find my Shixiong, so I'll be taking my leave now."

"Hold it," Wen Ya stopped him, "Do you know where they are?"

Cheng Qian knew in general that the area of islands and reefs on the East Sea was quite small, so Yan Zhengming and the others must have ended up nearby too. Even though he was new at this, he was able to ride his sword after all and could fly around the sea nearby while the wind and waves were calm. Finding them shouldn't be too hard.

But the next moment, he was shocked by Wen Ya's words, "I'll tell you this, they're on an uninhabited island less than five *li* from here. If you fly on your sword, you'll reach them in no time. But I suggest that you stay away — because Zhou Hanzheng also happened to be on that island."

Cheng Qian immediately came to a halt.

Wen Ya continued, “The East Sea was shaken so violently last night, that your group had also been affected, which meant that a formidable master had passed. Gu Yanxue... Ah, that pretty boy named Zhou must have escaped in the confusion too — Hmph, he’s quite quick to run.”

Cheng Qian wasn’t so anxious at first, but hearing Wen Ya’s words, he could no longer sit still. Before Wen Ya could finish speaking, Cheng Qian had leapt onto Shuangren and taken off into the air.

Wen Ya didn’t think that he would be so quick-tempered. Cursing under his breath, he flicked out a ray of azure light with his finger, producing an immortal-binding rope that went after Cheng Qian. It coiled around his body firmly and caused him to fall onto the reef again.

Wen Ya snapped, “Are you insane? Trying to get yourself killed? Who said that you’re the old demon lord’s reincarnation, was he blind?”

Those words came abruptly out of nowhere, but surprisingly, Cheng Qian understood. He struggled violently, “I’m not, Master had made a mistake — Senior, that Zhou Hanzheng harbors evil intentions, he might cause harm to Shixiong and the others, I must ask of you to show some mercy and release me.”

Wen Ya said, “Stop overestimating yourself. That pretty boy named Zhou might not be an honorable person, but his level of skill can’t be overlooked. If I had been in my prime, I might have been able to go against him... You? Hmph.”

Cheng Qian wasn’t moved in the slightest, “Many thanks for Senior’s information. I naturally wouldn’t be able to fight him fair and square, but I can attack him in secret or plot some other schemes. Senior, please don’t make things difficult for me.”

Wen Ya, “...”

He truthfully didn't know how Cheng Qian could speak such words. Among the common folks, a sixteen- to seventeen-year-old boy might have counted as an independent fellow, but in the cultivation world full of thousand-year-old figures, he was a mere little whelp that wasn't worthy of attention.

Wen Ya couldn't figure out how Han Muchun had raised Cheng Qian, the little whelp — not only did he feel no fear or respect for stronger people, he was also brazenly vicious!

Cheng Qian was beginning to lose his patience, but he had been refraining from turning hostile in consideration for Wen Ya's friendship with Muchun Zhenren. He gritted out, “Senior Wen!”

“Your sect...” Wen Ya suddenly let out a long sigh, “Kid, with just the bunch of you brats, you won't be able to support Fuyao Mountain.”

Cheng Qian had no idea why he kept badmouthing Fuyao Mountain, but he recalled that this man hadn't said much good things with his master too, so he wasn't bothered. He didn't argue against those words and just met Wen Ya's eyes for a grudging moment. Then he sneakily began examining the ropes on his body, planning to find an opening to escape.

But the next moment, the pressure around his body was gone. Wen Ya had summoned the immortal-binding ropes back.

Wen Ya said, “You managed to reach the stage of sword-riding at this age, so you're quite an outstanding one. I've known your master for such a long time, I can't just stand by and watch you get yourself killed. Here —”

Before he finished speaking, a few figures abruptly appeared on the reef. Wen Ya had produced three clones.

“If you could break through these three clones of mine, I will stop getting in your way,” Wen Ya said, “But there’s a rule. I don’t want to see your Fuyao Sect’s flowery and gaudy swordplay. You are only allowed to choose one technique, and can only use this technique repeatedly. If you can break through my clones, you can go and scheme against whoever you want.”

If only one technique was allowed, wouldn’t this be a battle of their cultivation base?

Cheng Qian almost laughed in anger — it felt like this Senior Wen had no consideration for his own respectability. To think that he would suggest a battle of their cultivation base, was it any different from challenging a five-year-old to an arm-wrestling match?

Truly, absolutely shameless.

[T/N: In accordance to the [poll results](#), from this chapter onward, we will use the Chinese pinyin instead of the English translation for their order of seniority.]

Da-shixiong: Eldest Shixiong Er-shixiong: Second Shixiong San-shixiong: Third Shixiong Si-shixiong: Fourth Shixiong]

Cheng Qian couldn't help firing at him, "My cultivation is weak. When I manage to break through Senior's three clones, Shixiong and the others' corpses would have already frozen over, if I hadn't starved to death before that — Senior Wen, please be more reasonable."

Wen Ya wasn't moved in the slightest. He swept his eyes over Cheng Qian. When young men are angry, or feeling dissent, or had their ambitions roused, or are feeling depressed, it is easy for their heart to harden, albeit unsteadily. They are also quite likely to show hostility due to being anxious and fearful. In this regard, Cheng Qian behaved quite like the common folk.

Wen Ya mercilessly fired back, "Then, you can't even break through my clones, but you want to fight Zhou Hanzheng? With what? Are you dreaming?"

Cheng Qian was about to argue, but Wen Ya pressed on mercilessly, “Revitalizing your sect? If you really want to revitalize your sect, the most logical thing to do right now is finding a place to hide and training yourself for some three or four centuries. From what I can see, you’re just scared of carrying the burden yourself, so you charge forward blindly without a care!”

The corner of Cheng Qian’s eye twitched violently, but his voice was mild when he spoke while raising Shuangren, “Senior, your words make perfect sense, but spurring me into action through negative remarks would never work.”

Wen Ya thought to himself, Cheng Qian was like a rock in the latrine, stubborn and misbehaved. He had to teach him a lesson.

So those three clones of his made their moves, leaping into the sky and surrounding Cheng Qian.

Striking out first against a junior, it was clear that Shopkeeper Wen had no sense of morals or integrity.

Shuangren swept toward the three clones like rolling waves, its sword aura stirring up the originally calm sea water at the edges of the reef. The water seemed to contain an explosive power as it crashed against the rocks, violently shaking the ground under them. Wen Ya’s three clones worked together flawlessly and created a large screen of light in the air, which came down on Cheng Qian like a fishnet.

The sword aura and the gigantic net collided in midair. With a loud booming sound, the reef quaked so hard that pieces of rock flew all over the place, almost splitting the reef in half.

Wen Ya himself was still sitting in his original spot. He hurriedly made a seal with his hands, protecting the rock under him so he wouldn't have to join the fish in the sea.

The three clones effectively suppressed Cheng Qian's sword aura with brute force. The net formed with the screen of light slowly began to shrink, firmly locking Cheng Qian within it.

Cheng Qian couldn't withstand the force or press on with his attack, so he had to retreat temporarily. He jumped on his sword and moved out of the way, trying to catch his breath.

"Tide Swordplay," Wen Ya said slowly, a cold smile on his face, "With that level of ambition, you dare to claim that you've practiced the Tide Swordplay?"

He suddenly whistled, the sound long and loud. The clones overhead promptly turned into a circle of faint figures. And then the clones began splitting, one into two, two into four, slowly increasing in numbers. Each of them held a sword produced out of thin air, the tips of the blades pointed at Cheng Qian.

All of the clones used completely different techniques from each other. They were like a group of flies filling the air, causing any onlookers to be dazzled just by watching.

Looking at these unruly flashes of sword aura, Cheng Qian's head spun so much that he felt like vomiting. For a moment, he was mercilessly forced into a tight corner.

Wen Ya suddenly exclaimed, "Look at the tides under your feet!"

Cheng Qian was startled.

At the moment, the deep blue sea was calm as the autumn moon. Only on this small reef island could they feel the tides crashing against the shore.

The force of the undercurrents was no gentler than a sword's edge, because their source was vast and inexhaustible. The sea brings together hundreds of rivers, cutting off the clouds, and can slip into the tiniest crevices, gently stirring the fine sands, never staking everything in a single throw...

Dangers and desperation lay everywhere, but there, too, lay opportunities and hope.

But Wen Ya Zhenren didn't give him any room to think. The light from the clones' swords converged to form an inescapable net, coming down on Cheng Qian as if intending to engulf him. Cheng Qian seemed to have had an epiphany earlier and reflexively raised his sword to parry, but he couldn't shake off the feeling that something was amiss, so his grip on the sword wasn't steady. Before the strike could connect, his sword aura had gone off course.

He was forced to avoid Wen Ya's attack again and stumbled back onto the reef, not daring to stop for even a moment. The tips of his feet tapped the ground lightly as he moved. At the same time, numerous sword glares chased him ceaselessly, charring the rocks where he had passed.

All this fleeing had caused the small inkling of epiphany in Cheng Qian's heart to disappear completely. His breath was stuck in his chest, so he could neither inhale nor exhale, causing him quite a lot of pain.

Right then, he heard Wen Ya's exclamation again, "Now look at yourself!"

There was a ringing sound in Cheng Qian's ears. His fingers loosened around his sword, almost causing him to drop Shuangren, which he had firmly held onto despite almost drowning to death.

All these years on Azure Dragon Island, he had only paid attention to forming his core and training his swordplay, always dreaming of throwing people like Zhou Hanzheng under his feet. He had only ever thought of revitalizing his sect, but he seldom sat down to think about the future, and even more rarely thought to contemplate himself.

The overwhelming pride and haughtiness in his heart were encased around his own weakness as a shield. There was only one thing that he feared: If he was too slow, his martial brothers would be looked down on by others.

Cheng Qian loathed words like ‘to have one’s soul scattered’. He had always felt that his master wasn’t dead, that his soul was just floating around the lands and watching him from somewhere. Those imaginary eyes always gave him so much fear and anxiety that he couldn’t rest easy.

Wen Ya, “Take this!”

Cheng Qian immediately halted his steps. Shuangren moved like the rolling clouds and flowing waters as it received the attack. At least in that moment, he felt that the sword in his hand wasn’t only connected to him, but also to the heavens and the earth.

In the path of cultivation, there were thousands of major principles to follow. But if one were to conclude it all in one sentence, wouldn’t it be ‘Look at the heavens and the earth, then look at yourself’?

The impetuosity in Cheng Qian’s sword aura immediately disappeared, but it was also not completely calm and steadfast. At the moment, his sword aura was dull, but there was an impression of continuity contained within it. This time, there was no trace of the previous anger that made it seem like he wanted to overturn the island. Shuangren’s chilling sword aura accurately pierced the screen of light.

The sword aura and the screen of light cancelled each other bit by bit, and somehow managed to ‘dissolve’ Wen Ya’s circle of clones within them.

Without warning, Cheng Qian pressed Shuangren down, retreating in order to advance, and immediately pushed forward again, just like a new wave rising before the preceding one had subsided. A series of exploding sounds rang out from all around them — Wen Ya’s remaining clones were disappearing one by one. In the blink of an eye, the screen of light had been engulfed by the frost-like sword aura. Silence fell over the reef island, leaving only Cheng Qian, who looked as if he had gained an epiphany, and Wen Ya Zhenren, who remained sitting with his legs crossed on the ground, to look at each other.

Only then did Cheng Qian feel that he was touching upon the true essence of ‘Tide Swordplay’ for the first time.

After all these years, he once again fell into meditation induced by his enlightenment. The clear Qi in the air around him carried the cool sea breeze and poured into his body without hesitation. His meridians, which had been molded through many years of hard work, accepted it all without a problem, his core circulating the Qi inside him. After just a brief moment, his internal wounds seemed to have healed significantly.

When Cheng Qian came back to himself from this meditation, the marble white color of the dawn sky was beginning to show on the east. Despite the considerable delay, Cheng Qian still made his obeisance to Wen Ya with a complicated face, “Many thanks to Senior.”

Wen Ya’s eyes drooped slightly, but the words he spoke were, “I have no idea what’s wrong with your Fuyao Sect. One has a weak will and is extremely soft-hearted, but entered the Dao through the sword. One is extremely stubborn and doesn’t care about the rules, but entered the Dao through the heart. Brat, your foundation is right here, but you’ve been

wasting your time on an insignificant problem all these years, aren't you afraid of falling into the wrong path?"

Cheng Qian silently lowered his head. For a moment, he couldn't find the words to say.

The Lecture Hall only ever taught methods of cultivation, and their sect leader could never restrain him. There had been no one to show the way for him as a senior — even if anyone had the intention to, Cheng Qian's haughty heart might not care to listen.

"You only charge around blindly, baring your fangs and brandishing your claws, are you a crab or something?" Wen Ya snapped, "What use does that flat-shelled creature have, other than being cooked as a side-dish for drinking?"

Cheng Qian couldn't help lowering his head further, but when Wen Ya spoke to this point, he swallowed audibly — this senior, who should have reached the stage of inedia, had somehow given himself a craving with his own words!

Cheng Qian, "..."

Wen Ya met Cheng Qian's odd gaze and immediately blew up in embarrassment, "What are you looking at, isn't it all because of you guys. I can't even go home, bastards, useless good-for-nothings!"

Cheng Qian immediately lowered his head and said obediently, "Yes."

After a moment, he couldn't help looking up again, "Senior, I can leave now, right?"

Wen Ya was stunned. In that moment, he finally understood Cheng Qian's stubbornness. Be it reaching a new level or having an epiphany, those were all trivial matters for this little whelp. In his eyes, none of those things could compare to a single hair on his martial brothers.

Wen Ya said with a straight face, "Those who tread the path of cultivation will experience thousands of trials and hundreds of tribulations. Only through the lightning strikes from the heavens could one find a shred of opportunity. From the beginning, familial relations were insignificant, while friendships formed along the way were long-lasting. Only after experiencing hardships could one find peace. Your heart is filled with so much distracting thoughts, how could you ever find the Great Dao this way?"

Cheng Qian answered without hesitation, "If life was so miserable, why pursue longevity? So you could suffer for longer? Senior, my master's Dao isn't like that."

"You're talking Dao with me?" Wen Ya looked at him in disbelief, "A little thing like you dares to talk... Alright, what is your master's Dao?"

In truth, Muchun Zhenren rarely talked about the Dao on purpose. Cheng Qian had regretted his words the moment they left his mouth, feeling as if he'd talked too big, but when Wen Ya prodded at him, his mind raced and suddenly formed a good thought, which he blurted out, "My master's way of cultivation is 'follow one's heart', 'be unrestrained' — Senior, pardon this junior's insolence, but I've been wondering for a long time: Does suffering in solitude for the sake of longevity count as following one's heart?"

Wen Ya was stunned by his question.

Cheng Qian was still worried for Yan Zhengming and the others, so he wasn't in the mood to continue talking nonsense. He cupped his fist with his other hand in obeisance and turned to leave on his sword.

But Wen Ya abruptly called out to him again, "Wait!"

Wen Ya stared at Cheng Qian with a complicated look and spoke slowly, "Even if you've been training with your sword for one night, your improvement is still very slight. Are you hoping to reach the sky in a single step? You can't defeat Zhou Hanzheng. Come, I'll give you something."

Stunned, Cheng Qian watched as Wen Ya pointed his finger in between his own brows. He seemed to be in great pain, but he was chanting something. A ball of azure light gradually began to appear from the space between his brows.

As the azure light spilled out bit by bit, Wen Ya's complexion began to visibly deteriorate, showing the hint of a spiritless air about him.

Cheng Qian's personality was quite aloof. He didn't usually associate with others and rarely went to discuss things with people. He had never hoped for anyone to reach out and provide him with assistance, much less this kind of help that evidently caused the other person to suffer.

He had no idea what the ball of azure light was supposed to be, but he could see that Wen Ya Zhenren didn't seem well and immediately tried to stop him, "Senior Wen, you don't need..."

Before he could finish his words, Wen Ya gave a low shout and caught the ball of azure light in his hand. The light burned brightly for a moment, but immediately dimmed again. In Wen Ya's hand was a piece of jade, which looked like a goose's egg. It was clear and transparent, its surface fine and smooth.

Wen Ya looked at the jade in his hand with a complicated gaze and smiled, “When I was cultivating back then, I had no connections to rely on and had no natural aptitude. Even the Azure Dragon Island had refused to accept me. Fortunately, a friend gifted me this item, it’s called the ‘Spirit-Condensing Jade’ [1]. When put inside a common person’s body, it can allow them to skip over the stage of Qi absorption and start cultivating immediately. But relying on an outside object to cultivate isn’t any different from cultivating by taking drugs. The resulting cultivation will always remain shallow — training like that isn’t fun, but this thing can be useful for fighting Zhou Hanzheng, so I’ll give it to you.”

After he finished speaking, he raised his hand without warning. Cheng Qian couldn’t duck out of the way in time and felt a surge of Qi colliding with his chest, which permeated into his body in the blink of an eye.

Cheng Qian instantly felt as if he had been drenched with cold water, the chill spreading from the top of his head to the tips of his feet. His core was thrown into a state of confusion. For a moment, he couldn’t even speak.

Wen Ya Zhenren watched as his face twisted and couldn’t help laughing out loud, “Don’t worry, this thing won’t cause you any harm, but it might not serve much use in the near future — I’ve been cultivating this Spirit-Condensing Jade for years, so if you wield it correctly, you can temporarily suppress Zhou Hanzheng’s abilities. Didn’t you say earlier that you’ll plot some other schemes if you can’t defeat him? Since you can’t raise your own abilities, suppressing his abilities would produce the same effect.”

Afterward, he produced a string of golden scriptures in his hand. This time, the scriptures were sent in between Cheng Qian’s brows. “This is the method of activation, remember well.”

For a while, Cheng Qian couldn’t even speak. Seeing the azure aura between his brows fade away, Wen Ya knew that the Spirit-Condensing Jade

had completely integrated into his body and nodded, “Alright, scram, don’t die.”

Cheng Qian had reached the stage of Concretion and could fly on his sword, so the Spirit-Condensing Jade was just a common artifact when put in his body. But Wen Ya Zhenren was different. No matter how oblivious Cheng Qian might be, he couldn’t possibly not notice it then — this was the item that allowed Wen Ya Zhenren to enter the Dao, it was the entire basis of his cultivation.

Looking at him again, after extracting the Spirit-Condensing Jade, half of Wen Ya Zenren’s beard and hair had turned white.

Cultivators don’t age. This was a clear indication that his cultivation had deteriorated greatly.

“I...” Cheng Qian couldn’t find the right words to say, “I can’t take this, Senior... This...”

“Shut your mouth. Entering the Dao with the help of an outside object, do you think I feel proud admitting it?” Wen Ya exclaimed in anger, “If my cultivation hadn’t been damaged by those rascals hunting me down, I would’ve shot that pretty boy to death with my own hands — I’ve given it to you, so take it, scram!”

Afterward, he flicked his sleeve violently, kicking up the sand on the reef island, which flew all over Cheng Qian’s face. Then Wen Ya leapt up and dove into the water. When Cheng Qian rushed there, he could only catch the glimpse of a back, which seemed as if it belonged to a large fish, disappearing in the blink of an eye.

Cheng Qian hurriedly jumped onto his sword and rose into the sky. Either because his swordplay had improved greatly the previous night, or because

he now had a Soul-Condensing Jade in his body, when he flew on his sword, his control was much better than before.

But he couldn't find Wen Ya Zhenren's figure anymore.

After sweeping his eyes over the surroundings and finding nothing, Cheng Qian sighed silently to himself. He kept this chance meeting and his senior's prestige close to his heart and turned to look for Yan Zhengming's group.

Yan Zhengming and the others' journey was purely an endless stream of misfortunes.

After being struck by the great waters, Yan Zhengming had almost jumped down after Cheng Qian, but was fortunately held back by Li Yun and Han Yuan. As the misfortune-plagued group advanced further, the strip of cloth under their feet seemed to have exhausted its energy after a short while, just like its owner Tang Wanqiu had said. Halfway through, they were forced to land on an uninhabited island.

Da-shixiong's soulless look was frankly quite frightening. He seemed close to being driven mad, so Li Yun had to comfort him, "If Xiao-Qian could already fly on his sword, would he be drowned by the water so easily? Let's make a fire here to wait for a while. When he sees the fire, he'll find his way to us."

Yan Zhengming paid no mind to his words. Ever since they lost Cheng Qian, he had remained constantly restless and anxious.

He looked into the distance and suddenly jumped to his feet, "The sea has calmed. All of you, stay here, I'm going to find him."

Li Yun was instantly thrown into complete distress and hurried to stop him. But before he could sort out his objections, someone else had stopped Yan Zhengming for him — when they landed, Li Yun had immediately put a circle of toads that he'd transfigured in place. After many improvements, the effects of his Golden Toad Liquid could last much longer now, and they could even be used to share information — he had originally set these things up to wait for Cheng Qian, but had accidentally found Zhou Hanzheng instead.

Unlike them, who were escaping miserably, Zhou Hanzheng was fully satisfied and contented with his escape. Seeing his high spirits, one couldn't possibly tell how he felt about losing most of his underlings on the Azure Dragon Island.

And yet, even if that Zhou person only had two or three masked men left with him, Zhou Hanzheng by himself wasn't someone that these miserable children could handle.

Even worse was, Zhou Hanzheng was extremely cautious. The moment he stepped foot on the island, he immediately noticed the things that Li Yun had placed around the shore.

"This is bad," Han Yuan watched him carefully through the toads' eyes and said in a low voice, "He might've noticed that there are people on the island."

"It's fine," Facing this danger, Yan Zhengming could only suppress his intention of immediately going to look for Cheng Qian, "Vile people are all scared of death. This time, he's out in the open while we're all hidden. He must be even more afraid than we are, we have to prevent him from figuring us out — Li Yun, don't stop the arrays, keep them up!"

Li Yun clenched his teeth and immediately immersed himself in the duty at hand. This was something that he'd learned from a book of miscellaneous subjects and shady things. With rocks and trees as the main media and charms as support, he could create a field of illusion. He didn't know how long they could hold Zhou Hanzheng off, but every second counted.

The island was quite small, Zhou Hanzheng could have just spread his consciousness over the island to figure out his opponents. But just as Yan Zhengming said, he was much too careful and didn't dare to take reckless actions, so Li Yun's bluff of an illusion could serve its purpose. And just like that, both parties began their exchange of probing each other, which lasted an entire night.

[1] '*Spirit-Condensing Jade*' The phrase used here is . It literally means 'spirit-gathering jade', but in this context, it's closer in meaning to 'directing the spirits' essence into the jade' than 'gathering the spirits into the jade'.

As the area around Zhou Hanzheng expanded, Li Yun's Golden Toad Water quickly ran out. But they didn't dare let the scope of their consciousness reach their opponent, so Yan Zhengming had no choice but to help Li Yun maintain the arrays while telling Han Yuan to carve plenty of basic wooden bird charms. This kind of charm was very elementary and had been enhanced by the animal-loving Li Yun, so without spending too much effort, the wooden tablets could become lifelike little birds. They could fly into the sky to serve as their eyes, and weren't easy to detect.

... It's just that Han Yuan's hands were a bit clumsy, so the birds he made always seemed to have two extra legs. Flying was fine, but they would be stumbling around if made to walk.

For the entire night, Li Yun didn't dare to let his mind wander the slightest bit, so he was extremely drained from maintaining the arrays. When he saw the colors of dawn rising on the east, he finally couldn't help asking, "How long do we need to keep this up?"

"Almost there," Yan Zhengming said calmly, "This person is always running around from place to place, he's not some idle person who could hang around freely. He wouldn't stay here to waste his time and energy."

This time, Sect Leader Yan was right again — as expected, after daybreak, Zhou Hanzheng seemed less interested in staying around.

At that moment, the surface of the sea was reflecting the sun's bright rays. One of the masked men carefully observed Zhou Hanzheng's face and said,

“Your Excellency, there is nothing to gain by staying here. Wouldn’t it be better for us to hurry back and refrain from causing new problems?”

Zhou Hanzheng clasped his hands behind his back, thought for a moment, and also believed that continuing to grapple with these unknown people would give him no benefit. He had accomplished all of the goals for his quest this time and could now retire after winning merit, so he nodded. He turned to look at the surroundings, which seemed shrouded in mist due to the illusion, and raised his voice to speak, “To the fellow cultivator on the island, this humble person has only dropped by to rest for a while, and harbors no evil intentions. If I have offended you in any way, please forgive my wrongdoing.”

Li Yun sighed heavily hearing this, almost letting loose with his arrays. He wiped the cold sweat on his forehead and said in a low voice, “Good heavens, he’s finally willing to leave.”

At the moment, the distance between them and Zhou Hanzheng was less than a hundred *zhang*. They were right behind a small hill, so even without those scouts, they could still hear Zhou Hanzheng’s words.

Yan Zhengming didn’t respond. He had been using charms to enhance the arrays for an entire night, and the only burin he carried on his person was given to Han Yuan, so he had to use a normal sword. When carving charms, there was a huge difference between using a specialized burin and using a sword. This was the first time for Yan Zhengming, so he occasionally lost control and caused the clear Qi in the charms to burst out. Fine wounds covered his hands because of this, but a constant gloomy air remained on his face the entire time. Even when he heard that Zhou Hanzheng was leaving, he still showed no sign of joy.

When would he finally be able to stand out with pride and fight that Zhou person like a man?

Zhou Hanzheng didn't seem to mind the lack of reply, only saying, "Let's go."

Afterward, he led the masked men to fly on their swords. But Zhou Hanzheng had only gone halfway up when he felt eyes trained on him. His cultivation wasn't weak, so of course his senses were very sharp. He instinctively reached out in the direction of those eyes and caught... a four-legged bird.

Zhou Hanzheng's brows knitted. He truly had no idea what strange breed this was, but a thought suddenly occurred to him. He tightened his fingers around the bird's neck to kill it, and the struggling bird turned into a rough charm under his scrutiny.

With a light squeeze of his fingers, the charm broke into two pieces, the clear Qi within it dispersing naturally. Any skilled person could tell that the carver's cultivation wasn't high.

Yan Zhengming's heart immediately gave a loud thump as he thought, *This is bad.*

Zhou Hanzheng brought his nose close to the charm, as if he were a hunting dog, and gave it a sniff. His facial expression shifted slightly, and then he seemed to have recalled something. The deep knit between his brows loosened immediately, a malicious half-smile spreading on his face. "I was wondering who it could possibly be. All my efforts up until now aren't for naught..."

Before this, he hadn't dared to spread his consciousness over the island because he was worried that there was someone whose cultivation was higher than him. If a person's consciousness had been detected by others and suppressed, it would immediately turn back against its master. At the moment, Zhou Hanzheng had somehow figured out that the people on the

island were Yan Zhengming's group, so he no longer had anything to fear. Before he even finished his words, his consciousness had spread over the entire island with a pressuring aura. Li Yun's illusion was only a bluff, it couldn't withstand any sort of attack, and there was no hiding their current location.

Zhou Hanzheng stood on his sword in the air above them and smiled leisurely, "Sect Leader Yan, no matter what, I'd given you a lesson once in the Lecture Hall. Isn't there the saying 'A teacher for a day is a father for a lifetime'? Why do you hide, refusing to come out and meet me?"

With a flick of his sleeve, the Sansi Fan instantly produced a series of lightning bolts, which broke right into Li Yun's arrays. In an instant, the superficial illusion was shattered.

Li Yun collapsed on the ground, as if he had received a critical attack, and couldn't get up for quite a while.

Yan Zhengming reached out to help him move aside. His complexion seemed worse than Li Yun's, but he still stood without a word, grabbed his sword, and started to walk out.

Han Yuan turned pale in fright, "Da-shixiong, what are you doing?"

Yan Zhengming's face was dark as he kept walking, "Don't follow me."

Up until that point in life, Han Yuan had never been a courageous person. He looked at Li Yun, and then Shuikeng. He was at a complete loss, standing still with a blank mind for some time. And then he inhaled deeply before running to catch up.

Zhou Hanzheng gave Yan Zhengming a rather appreciative look, "During the years we've spent apart, Sect Leader Yan seems to have casted off your

old self and become an entirely new person. This old friend of yours feels quite gratified.”

Yan Zhengming suddenly understood Cheng Qian’s sentiment of never wasting his breath on words before drawing his sword. In his entire life, he had never loathed a single person so much. The taste of hatred was frightening, but it also seemed to pump adrenaline into his veins, becoming a source of endless power.

The vast stretch of the sky was bright and clear over the island. The young sect leader’s heart was filled with murderous intent.

He still had his Shidi and Shimei behind him. No matter what, this battle was unavoidable. Yan Zhengming didn’t want to waste his breath on talking nonsense, so he drew his sword and charged forward.

But Zhou Hanzheng didn’t respond to the attack. Instead, the two masked men rose into the air on both sides of him, cutting off Yan Zhengming’s path.

Zhou Hanzheng watched without a care and sighed with emotion, “Fuyao — back then, the chain of mountains could go straight into the clouds, the sect was full of formidable masters. With just a stomp of their feet, even the heavens and the earth would tremble. Such power and prestige, one wouldn’t have expected it to fall so far that its members would wander the wilderness without aim. The turns of fate are truly hard to predict.”

With a strike from his sword, Yan Zhengming broke through the two masked men’s defenses. His body turned into a flash of light, charging straight toward Zhou Hanzheng. The wind from his sword caused Zhou Hanzheng’s clothes to flutter, but Zhou Hanzheng remained unruffled and didn’t even unfold his fan. A light tinkling sound was heard as the Sansi Fan

produced a bolt of lightning and flames, cutting a chink into Yan Zhengming's sword.

“If it were in the past, with Sect Leader Yan's cultivation, you might not even be able to become an inner disciple,” Zhou Hanzheng smiled, “You're always wearing the sect leader's seal around your neck, isn't it too heavy for you? Why don't I help you carry the burden —”

His fingers suddenly curled into claws. There seemed to be a black cyclone in the palm of his hand, and he reached straight for Yan Zhengming's chest from above.

Yan Zhengming dodged to the side and brandished his sword to slash, but the impact caused his wrists to shake violently.

Zhou Hanzheng's claws seemed to contain an impenetrable force. After receiving a sword attack, not only did it remain unharmed, it increased greatly in size instead and came down on Yan Zhengming with a pressuring aura.

Right then, Yan Zhengming heard Han Yuan exclaim, “Here! I'll give you some big slap!”

Yan Zhengming's heart throbbed. He lowered his face and saw that Han Yuan, Li Yun, and everyone else had come out from behind the small hill. The two masked men went straight for them and quickly broke into a fight with Li Yun, who was barely holding on, and Han Yuan, who was useless to begin with. In an instant, the situation turned dangerous.

With just a moment of distraction, Zhou Hanzheng's gigantic hand had closed the distance between them. Yan Zhengming had nowhere to hide, so he could only push himself despite his injuries and lashed out with a strike of ‘Backfire’, intending to drag Zhou Hanzheng down with him.

And yet, even though he was willing to bet it all, Zhou Hanzheng valued his own life greatly. He was forced to back off, thinking, *How fascinating, so it's true that rabbits could bite when pushed beyond their limits.*

But right as he retreated, the frost-like flash of a sword suddenly came toward him from behind. A chill came over Zhou Hanzheng's heart. The Sansi Fan was finally unfolded, producing a pillar of lightning and flames as it struck forth.

The pillar of lightning fell into the sea. The raging waves seemed to have produced a water dragon, producing a rain of salt as droplets of moisture fell on the island.

Zhou Hanzheng carefully backed off. When he saw the person behind him, his pupils shrunk — it was Cheng Qian.

When Cheng Qian first ended up on the reef island earlier, he'd already looked like a thoroughly drenched beggar. Added with Wen Ya Zhenren's beating, his clothes had practically been reduced to rags. He couldn't have possibly looked any worse for wear. But as soon as Yan Zhengming saw his outrageous form, the murderous intent filling his chest was immediately swept away.

In that instant, Sect Leader Yan finally realized how 'mature' he was — the moment he saw Cheng Qian, he almost broke into tears. He opened his mouth, but for a while, he couldn't speak a word.

Cheng Qian swept his eyes over Yan Zhengming's unguarded look and suddenly had the feeling that someone had always kept him in their mind, longing for him and worrying for his well-being. He knew that this wasn't the right time and place, but he couldn't help the corners of his eyes curving slightly.

In a person's lifetime, wasn't it natural to wish that when they came home at the end of the day, worn out from the hardships of life, there would be someone to open the door for them, scolding, 'Where have you gone this time'?

Zhou Hanzheng hadn't seen Cheng Qian before this, but he didn't particularly care — in his eyes, other than the sect name that they were carrying, these half-baked brats had no worth for him to remember. He wouldn't have expected such a surprising turn of events.

Back then in the Lecture Hall, Zhou Hanzheng had taken a liking to Cheng Qian's gaze. Now, after a few years' growth, the youth had become more restrained on the outside, but his inside remained the same, which made a surprising match with the aura of his frosty sword — and yet, despite his admiration, Zhou Hanzheng didn't care to acknowledge Cheng Qian's mediocre cultivation. He smiled slightly, "What, the little fellow cultivator also wants to exchange blows with me?"

"Senior Zhou has misunderstood, I have no such intentions." Cheng Qian held Shuangren in his hands as he nodded at Zhou Hanzheng with ceremonious deference, but the next moment, without warning, he activated the Spirit-Condensing Jade from Wen Ya Zhenren.

When Zhou Hanzheng felt his entire body turn heavy, he already had a bad feeling. And then he realized that his core seemed to have been layered with ice, so its circulation was sluggish. His cultivation had been suppressed by at least sixty percent.

Zhou Hanzheng was shocked. What kind of cursed technique was this?

But Cheng Qian gave him no time to react. Carrying the force of the tides, Shuangren moved forward and struck Zhou Hanzheng head on.

Zhou Hanzheng continuously retreated with no shred of dignity. Because his cultivation had been suppressed, the protective aura around his body was dispersed without a trace. Shuangren mercilessly tore the front of his robes open, instantly exposing the skin underneath.

“This junior hasn’t come to exchange blows,” Cheng Qian continued his words with a temperate voice, “I’ve come to do away with a certain person.”

This turn of events had stunned everyone. Han Yuan, who had been cast away by the masked men, coughed a few times, stretched his neck for a better look, and mumbled, “That’s Little Shixiong? Is he being possessed by something?”

Shuikeng opened her mouth, but accidentally inhaled a mouthful of seawater and hurried to spit them out.

“It’s not that Xiao-Qian has become stronger, it’s Zhou Hanzheng,” Li Yun quickly reacted, “Look, he suddenly couldn’t even stand just now. The protective aura around him has disappeared too!”

Yan Zhengming thought anxiously, *What kind of suspicious person did this brat meet while he was missing? What kind of shady practices had he learned?*

At the same time, without missing a beat, he cut off the masked men trying to help their master.

Water vapors on the island were agitated by the Tide Swordplay, the fine fragments surging in the air before frosting over. Zhou Hanzheng realized with a jolt, “Wait... That’s Shuangren, the lethal sword? Why is it in your possession?”

Cheng Qian didn't care to answer him. With a swing of his sword, the fine frost in the air had condensed into a vortex. The bottom was sharp like an icicle, pointed straight at the spot between Zhou Hanzheng's brows.

Zhou Hanzheng had never expected such a young person to not show the slightest hesitation toward killing, and let out a furious howl. The Sansi Fan was buffeted by the sea wind, the flames and sparks around the fan visibly stifled by the cold frost filling the air. He waved his fan violently, almost failing to catch his breath. He'd summoned a gust of wind, which carried sparks of lightning within it, to blow away the icicle bearing down on him. But the next moment, the ice fragments returned like tides to the shore. In the blink of an eye, they had pieced themselves back together, and seemed even more powerful than before!

Zhou Hanzheng continued to be pushed back. While trying to break through the ridiculous restriction on himself, he glared at Cheng Qian maliciously, "Little brat, I suggest to you not to pass the point of no return with anything in life, otherwise you will definitely have regrets."

Hearing this, Cheng Qian almost broke out laughing. He thought, *Why don't you tell yourself those words while you were trampling on others?*

He made a sword seal with his hands, sending Shuangren after Zhou Hanzheng like an arrow released from its bow. The agitated water vapors were halfway between real and fake, their momentum so frightening that even the bystanders were stunned.

Zhou Hanzheng forced himself to meet the attack. Lightning sparks collided with solid frost. With a loud booming sound, the heavens and the earth seemed to quake. At that moment, Cheng Qian's core was in better condition than Zhou Hanzheng's, which was being suppressed by the Spirit-Condensing Jade. He had also just found the essence of Tide Swordplay, and gave his opponent no space to breathe.

After receiving three consecutive attacks, Zhou Hanzheng coughed up a mouthful of blood.

As expected, Cheng Qian's 'do away with a certain person' wasn't an exaggeration. Those three consecutive attacks had almost drained his own core, but he couldn't care less. With his Spirit-Condensing Jade, he once again forced himself to move. He leapt up, reached for Shuangren, and gathered all his pent up grudge and vengeance in this one strike, intending to end Zhou Hanzheng under his sword.

Zhou Hanzheng's pupils shrunk to the size of a needle's point. In his desperation, he tossed away the Sansi Fan and made a series of complicated seals with his hands. The boundless clear skies abruptly turned dark, thick clouds rolling in as they gathered. Zhou Hanzheng's fan was only enough to hinder Cheng Qian for a split second — the lightning-imbued fan couldn't withstand the force of an ancient lethal sword. It broke in two with a splitting sound, falling onto the ground miserably.

Zhou Hanzheng couldn't break through the restriction around his body despite his efforts. A desperate man would risk anything, so he used his own physical body as a guide and summoned the Divine Thunders from the Ninth Heaven!

Blinded by his murderous intent, Cheng Qian didn't even raise his face despite the heavenly might bearing down on him. The only thing occupying his mind was getting rid of Zhou Hanzheng, everything else was beyond his care.

Yan Zhengming, who had just finished beating the two masked men down, turned around after hearing the movement and could feel his soul leaving his body.

He accelerated the worn sword under his feet to its limit and cut right into the battle, catching Cheng Qian around his waist and tackling him to the side. It felt like the divine thunders had brushed against him. The fine hairs on Yan Zhengming's back stood on their ends, sending shivers down his spine.

The uninhabited island quaked so violently that even the ocean was affected. A large charred hole was blown into the ground.

For a moment, Yan Zhengming's ears were deafened by the thunder. He felt around for Cheng Qian's collar, gripped it in his hands, and roared, "What the hell were you doing!"

Cheng Qian was in no better condition. He could only feel the tremors in Da-shixiong's chest, but couldn't hear a word of what he'd said, so he howled back, "What are you yelling? I can't hear!"

Yan Zhengming gave the back of his head a merciless smack. Cheng Qian had almost lost all of his strength with the earlier strike and wasn't prepared for this, so his head was smacked forward, causing his forehead to bump against Yan Zhengming's shoulder.

But before he could raise his face, the offending hand had pressed on the back of his head without any room for argument — Yan Zhengming was firmly holding him in his arms.

At that moment, Yan Zhengming's grip was so tight that he was trembling. It felt as if he was waking up from a nightmare, or as if he had just survived a deadly calamity.

In this world, nothing could bring him such immense comfort that this dirty body in his arms did.

Thousands of words suddenly burst forth in his heart. For a while, he didn't even know where to start. Vaguely, he felt as if he was grasping onto something, but he also couldn't help feeling dazed. Before he could sort things out, the thunderous roars had passed. Cheng Qian, the insensitive little thing, pushed him away while rubbing the back of his own head. He announced to Yan Zhengming's recovered ears, "I haven't gotten rid of that Zhou person, I'll talk to you after."

Yan Zhengming, "..."

Even though he himself wasn't sure what he wanted to say, the sensation of being blown off was quite unpleasant.

Zhou Hanzheng was being suppressed by the Spirit-Condensing Jade to begin with and had suffered injuries afterward. He had then used his own body to summon the Divine Thunder, so his meridians were practically ruined at this point. Even if the effects of the Spirit-Condensing Jade had passed when Cheng Qian lost his strength earlier, he was still paralyzed on the ground, unable to get up anymore.

Mouth filled with blood, Zhou Hanzheng glared at the approaching Cheng Qian scornfully. His throat could only produce gargling sounds. He repeatedly tried to get up, but would always fall back onto the ground. His bony hands dug into the soil, leaving trails of blood, producing a horrifying image.

Unfortunately for him, Cheng Qian had an immovable heart. Facing this person, he wouldn't feel pity or fear. He went straight for him, fully meaning to end Zhou Hanzheng with one strike of his sword.

But right in that moment, the corners of Zhou Hanzheng's lips suddenly curled into a demonic smile. Something in his sleeve produced a sharp sound. Cheng Qian's brows furrowed as he realized with a jolt that

something wasn't right. The next moment, a malicious wind came from behind him.

Cheng Qian knew that he should dodge, but because he had been straining himself too much earlier, he couldn't gather his strength —

Pain erupted from the middle of his back. A hand had pierced his back, cutting through his body and coming out of his chest.

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Sometimes, a single instance could become extremely long, so long that it seemed to stretch into eternity.

In a person's lifetime, they might experience a few instances like this. On the verge of death, for example.

Cheng Qian reflexively pointed Shuangren backward, the sword hovering in midair, until he saw the face of the person behind him — Han Yuan.

There were many reasons for Han Yuan to suddenly come up behind him. He might have wanted to watch, or add another kick to Zhou Hanzheng, or ramble for a bit to vent... Nobody would've guarded against him.

At that moment, his Si-shidi's eyes were blood-red, just like the rogue cultivators on Azure Dragon Island. That familiar face was shrouded in a dark aura, his features twisted. He seemed to have gathered the entirety of his energy to this one hand and used too much power, breaking his own fingers, but he showed no sign of feeling pain.

The rogue cultivators on the island who had been affected by Soul-Painting were the same — let's not mention pain, they wouldn't even notice death looking them straight in the eyes.

Cheng Qian stared at Han Yuan in astonishment. He could feel his energy and life force bleeding out from the hole in his chest, along with the joy and fury in his heart. There was no patching it up, there was no use in struggling, no matter how much he couldn't believe this situation.

Emotionlessly, Han Yuan returned his gaze. He pulled his hand out of Cheng Qian's chest, causing the blood and gore on his hand to splatter on his face. He then watched as Cheng Qian collapsed at his feet, as if in a trance.

Cheng Qian had been staring at him all along, limbs twitching subconsciously. The little remaining color on his face seemed to gather in a circle around his eyes, but he couldn't speak a single word.

All the ups and downs of the past ten years, at the moment, they had all faded into trivialities, falling into the absurdity of 'Such is the way of life'.

At last, Shuangren, which was already held against Han Yuan's neck, trembled violently before falling like an ordinary piece of metal, only producing a shallow cut on Han Yuan's skin.

This turn of events happened so rapidly that everyone was dumbfounded. Only when Shuikeng cried out first did Yan Zhengming seem to snap out of his dream-like state. He was still in his half-kneeling position on the ground, but his limbs felt like lead. His entire body had stiffened like a rock, so he couldn't even stand.

But Li Yun, who had always been a coward, was overtaken with emotions in that moment. Forgetting the horrifying image of the rogue cultivators on the island, he rushed forward without a care and pushed Han Yuan away.

After being pushed away, Han Yuan's body tipped backward and fell, but he didn't even try to get up. His blank gaze was turned a bit sideways. If it weren't for the rise and fall of his chest, he would've looked just like a fresh corpse.

"Xiao-Qian, Xiao-Qian..." Li Yun's gaze was muddled by tears as he helplessly kneeled next to Cheng Qian. One of his hands aimlessly felt

around his own body, as if still holding onto a shred of hope that he could procure anything to help.

Cheng Qian was lying on his side like a dried fish. Probably because he'd heard Li Yun's voice, his dazed eyes suddenly regained some light. Then Shuangren rose into the air, brushing past Li Yun, almost freezing the tears on his face, and sunk straight into Zhou Hanzheng's skull.

This sword and the person wielding it seemed to fully satisfy the saying 'Even in death, the heart of men is immovable as steel'.

Zhou Hanzheng was barely holding on after being released from the Spirit-Condensing Jade, and then he'd activated the 'Art of Soul Painting' that he had placed on Han Yuan in the past. He was basically finished at that point. After receiving that last strike, the biggest calamity of this generation was finally ended.

Cheng Qian had a special connection with Shuangren, so he didn't need to see for himself that Zhou Hanzheng had truly died under his sword.

A small smile spread on the youth's bloodstained face — he had finally killed that Zhou person. From now on, as long as they were careful, nobody out there would know that they were from the Fuyao Sect. Nobody would come after them, aiming for those questionable artifacts on Fuyao Mountain...

Cheng Qian let out a small breath in relief, feeling as if he could finally retire after winning merit. His face turned toward the ground slightly. It was as if a person on the verge of death would instinctively search for a final resting place.

At that moment, Li Yun exclaimed in surprise, "Han Yuan! What are you doing?"

As soon as Zhou Hanzheng was killed, the puppet-like Han Yuan had twitched violently. But there seemed to be something else affecting him, because Han Yuan didn't fully wake up. His dazed eyes turned to look at the surroundings. When he found Cheng Qian, signs of struggle appeared on his face, as if the real Han Yuan was fighting to regain control over his body.

But in the end, he didn't manage to wake up.

Han Yuan suddenly stood. Without sparing a glance to his sect allies, he walked straight toward the sea.

Li Yun was sobbing so hard he could hardly breathe. Making a seal with his hands, which he didn't even know if he'd done correctly, he slapped Han Yuan's back. Countless fine webs spread out from his palm, binding Han Yuan within them. "Stay right where you are!"

Han Yuan allowed those fine webs to cut into his own body, producing a myriad lines of wounds, as if he couldn't feel a thing. Li Yun clenched his teeth and curled his fingers inward, about to forcefully pull him back. But right then, Han Yuan's body was suddenly engulfed in flames. There seemed to be something with those flames — in the blink of an eye, they had completely incinerated Li Yun's webs along with the clothes on Han Yuan's body. And then, with nothing left to hinder him, the completely naked Han Yuan leapt up and dove into the mighty sea just like that. He didn't surface again.

But Cheng Qian wasn't aware of these happenings. The entirety of his senses had been dulled, all of them focused on his pain. A pair of cold hands reached out, pulling him up and supporting his body. That person's trembling fingers brushed against his face.

How strange. At the moment, Cheng Qian couldn't even smell the blood all over the ground around him, but he was somehow able to catch that fragrance of orchids.

This was the scent wafting out of Da-shixiong's sleeves whenever he applied medicine for him, the scent faintly lingering on the sheets whenever he lazed around in Shixiong's room. Whenever this scent filled the air around him, he always felt drowsy, on the verge of falling asleep.

Cheng Qian's consciousness began to fade. The clarity inspired by his desire to drag Zhou Hanzheng down with him had passed, so for a moment, he had forgotten where he was.

"I..." Cheng Qian began to rave in a soft voice.

Yan Zhengming lowered his head, bringing his own ears close to Cheng Qian's lips, "Nn?"

"... want to go... home..."

Yan Zhengming was stunned for quite a while. The smile on his face was somewhere between joyful and sorrowful.

He staggered to his feet with Cheng Qian in his arms, saying gently, "Alright, go home, Shixiong will take you back to Fuyao Mountain, let's go."

Cheng Qian seemed to have smiled. He was gradually losing the strength to speak, so he fell silent.

At the same time, a thought came to him out of nowhere: *How painful. Dying is so painful. Did it also hurt this much when I was born?*

And then he remembered, when he was born, his birth mother seemed to have endured the pain for him.

All of a sudden, Cheng Qian's resentment toward his parents and everyone else vanished completely, like a breath of wind. Even the difficulties of living without a home and depending on other people for their livelihood had been dispersed in the serene fragrance of orchids.

At last, Cheng Qian's head abruptly lost its support, weakly falling against Yan Zhengming's shoulder.

The bonds of the mortal world were like a farce in the play of life, coming and going as they pleased. What had passed could not be chased.

Li Yun hurried to catch up to him, "Shixiong! Shixiong! Put him down, Xiao-Qian is gone!"

Yan Zhengming refused to listen. Li Yun grabbed his elbow, "Shixiong!"

Yan Zhengming's footsteps paused as he turned to look at him silently. Not a single drop of tear had fallen from his eyes. Li Yun's heart jumped to his throat — he was afraid that he would hear the words 'Tong Qian has fallen asleep, don't be noisy'.

At the moment, one of them had died and another had gone missing. If yet another one went insane, Li Yun would have no idea what to do. He took half a step back, voice trembling, "Da-shixiong, please don't scare me."

"I know." Yan Zhengming lowered his eyes, speaking in a low voice, as if talking to himself, "I haven't gone mad. Make Shimei stop crying."

Hearing this, Li Yun became even more frightened instead, because Dashixiong's insanity seemed a bit different from normal.

"Go and fetch some water." After giving that order, he didn't even turn to look before carrying Cheng Qian's corpse to the center of the uninhabited island, murmuring, "Get him all clean... and then we'll figure out a way to make a boat."

Li Yun asked, dumbfounded, "Go where with the boat?"

Yan Zhengming, "We'll go back to check the Yan house first. But I reckon the Yan house is already gone. Even though my family is wealthy, it's but a house full of common folks. Getting rid of them is no different from overturning an ant's nest... I'm only going to see things for myself. If it's gone, I'll stop thinking about it."

Li Yun's body abruptly went cold. On their way here, they had still been lying to themselves that Xueqing's Puppet Charm had just gone missing, and Xueqing himself was fine. Of course the Yan house would be alright. But now, his sect leader seemed to have completely accepted all the grievous news that the world might throw his way.

Zheshi silently put Shuikeng down and fetched some water quickly. He then helped Yan Zhengming lower Cheng Qian onto the ground and wash away the bloodstains covering the youth's body. After doing all these, Yan Zhengming still felt that Cheng Qian's sloppily-dressed state was an injustice to him, so he took off his own outer robe and wrapped it around Cheng Qian.

Yan Zhengming half-knelt next to Cheng Qian, staring at that face in a daze for a long time. It felt as if he was witnessing all of the hope in his own heart turn to dust.

Yan Zhengming suddenly thought, “Why am I still alive, why don’t I go with him?”

The moment this thought occurred to him, the core in his body instantly began to turn in reverse. An ominous color suddenly came over Yan Zhengming’s face, the faint warning sign of a Qi deviation. Thousands of resentful thoughts rose in his heart, forming an inescapable restraint on his soul. Zhou Hanzheng, Tang Yao, Bai Ji... Countless faces passed right in front of his eyes.

“Why don’t they die?” Yan Zhengming suddenly mumbled, “Does the heavenly law exist to let shameless people achieve longevity?”

Zheshi, who was the nearest to him, immediately noticed the strangeness. He called out in a small voice, “Sect Leader?”

Yan Zhengming’s gaze slowly turned toward him. At the moment, those familiar, ever-smiling peach blossom-shaped eyes were like dark endless wells, so dark that finding their edges were impossible. Yan Zhengming suddenly started laughing in a low voice, speaking with each word enunciated clearly, “Even if I’ve achieved the Dao, I’ll still run wild without fear and massacre people indiscriminately, taking everything I want as I please. If anyone dares to stand in my way, I’ll cut them down with a thousand strikes and make sure they can never join the cycle of rebirth, even if they’re a god or Buddha!”

Li Yun was horrified, “Shixiong, you, what are you saying?”

“Why?” Yan Zhengming’s voice was low in his throat, “Why!”

Before he even finished his words, a surge of dark energy had risen around him. A circle of sand and rocks were kicked up into the air, preventing the others from coming close to him. Li Yun reached out to grab his shoulder,

but before he could touch Yan Zhengming, he had been pushed back at least three steps and fell on his rear.

Zheshi was even more at a loss, so he could only look at Li Yun helplessly.

Li Yun leapt to his feet, trying to put up a threatening front, “Yan Zhengming! Xiao-Qian is dead, Xiao-Yuan is missing, do you think I’m heartless, do you think I’m not in pain? I’d rather the one who’d died be me!”

From a young age, Li Yun’s personality had never been forceful, and he never really showed his bad side. As he grew up, he very rarely used harsh words or lost his temper, so with just a few sentences, he had used up all of his pent up anger and quickly became drained. After stomping his foot, Li Yun inhaled, eyes red. Then, sounding as if he was on the verge of tears, he spoke the words that he had never dared to admit out loud all these years, “At least Xiao-Qian is much stronger than me.”

Unfortunately, this rare heartfelt confession of his had fallen on deaf ears, because Yan Zhengming seemed to have lost his hearing. A rock on the ground flew up and smacked Li Yun’s face, leaving a bloody stain. Li Yun was forced back a few more steps and happened to bump into Shuikeng, who had been left aside without supervision.

Shuikeng helplessly clung to his thigh. Only a few days had passed, but her chubby face had visibly become thinner, her chin so sharp that it could compare with the two Soul-Searching Needles hanging around her neck. After a quick glance over her, Li Yun suddenly squatted down and pressed on her shoulder, saying urgently, “Lend me the Soul-Searching Needle!”

Before Shuikeng could react, Li Yun had tugged off one of the Soul-Searching Needles. He broke the wooden plug with a flick of his fingers and flung it toward Yan Zhengming.

Shuikeng was stunned. With a shrill scream from her, the Soul-Searching Needle disappeared into the dark mist, accurately sinking into Yan Zhengming's shoulder.

The thick dark mist instantly dispersed. With a low grunt, Yan Zhengming collapsed forward and fell on top of Cheng Qian. For a while, he couldn't get up.

Li Yun immediately rushed toward him, quickly plucking off the poisonous needle and cutting off Yan Zhengming's blood flow. He struck Yan Zhengming, sending his own energy into Yan Zhengming's body, forcing out the poison before it could spread, and only relaxed when the black blood flowing out had turned red. He then procured a bottle of antidote, which had been dipped in the sea water earlier, and nudged at the unmoving Yan Zhengming, mumbling, "You didn't respond to my calls... There was no other choice, Shixiong, take the antidote for now."

Yan Zhengming didn't raise his face. Li Yun waited for a while, but received no response. So he carefully placed his hand on Yan Zhengming's uninjured shoulder, and finally felt his Da-shixiong's body shaking like a leaf in the wind.

Holding onto Cheng Qian's body, long since gone cold, Yan Zhengming cried until he lost his voice.

After staying on the island for half a month, they finally finished making a small boat with rough carvings of charms. The small boat could barely fit two people. Fortunately, Shuikeng was still quite small, so she could squeeze in. Yan Zhengming could fly on his sword, so he could go along with them somewhat. With a piece of cloth, he wrapped up Cheng Qian's Shuangren to carry with him. Their luggage couldn't have been any simpler.

"Sect Leader, let's go." Li Yun's voice came as a reminder.

Yan Zhengming nodded. He turned back to look at the obscure uninhabited island for the last time. All the youthfulness that used to be on his face seemed to have been replaced with a gloomy air all within one night's time, as if the years of his heart had been stretched endlessly. In just a brief moment, the young man had thoroughly remoulded himself and grown to maturity.

As Yan Zhengming gazed upon the island, his features suddenly softened, revealing minute hints of warmth, "One day, when we can return to Fuyao Mountain without fear, we'll come back to take you home, okay?"

Of course, there was nobody to answer him.

Yan Zhengming carried the bundled up Shuangren on his back, stepped onto his nicked sword, and flew up to lead the way.

The sea and the heavens seemed to be of the same color, both of them boundless and indistinct.

Book 2, End

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The rain and wind were dark and gloomy. In the midst of the dense forest was a narrow winding trail, its end far beyond sight.

This place had evidently been deserted for a long time. After being drenched by the heavy rain, the ground became muddy and much more difficult to tread.

A youth, about sixteen to seventeen years old, was helping an old man as they made their way through with great difficulty. Both of them were wearing raincoats made of straw, which barely served their purpose. After walking for most of the evening, they had been thoroughly drenched. The old man seemed to have some problem with his leg, so he couldn't handle the cold well, and would occasionally stop to rub his aching knee.

He squinted his old eyes, struggling to look into the distance, and couldn't help sighing.

Next to him, the youth complained, "What immortals? Nonsense! They're always taking our offerings, but whenever we try to meet them, we'd suffer such difficulties. What use is there for the villagers, scrimping and saving on our own expenses to worship them?"

The old man was startled hearing those words and hurried to say, "Don't speak out of line!"

The youth's eyes were so wide with his glare that they seemed round, as if he were a little tiger. He continued in annoyance, "Am I wrong? They describe it so pompously as protecting us here, but did those immortals ever bless us with favorable weather? Whenever we encountered a great drought or flood, did they ever ask for any less offerings? When the King of Anping

staged an armed rebellion, bringing disaster over Shiwu Town with bandits making a scene everywhere and driving people out of their homes, did they ever show their faces? Fine, even if these were all the affairs of the mortal world and beyond the immortals' care, then what about this time? There's an evil spirit terrorizing the village, devouring people and bringing so much unrest, but they're still acting oblivious, waiting for us to beg for their help?"

The old man's leg hurt so much he couldn't straighten his waist as he spoke, "Immortals cultivate in peace and don't care about worldly matters. If we have anything to ask of them, of course we must seek them out ourselves! What nonsense are you spouting!"

The young man said in anger, "Oh, really? This trail is the only way to reach Mingming Valley, we need to endure so much hardship, and those who don't have a sincere heart wouldn't be able to withstand it all! When they send their people to claim the offerings, why don't they come down step-by-step like this? But now they're talking about sincerity..."

"Liulang, shut your mouth!" The old man forcefully jabbed his walking cane on the ground, "If you keep spouting nonsense, haul your ass back home! Don't bring harm to the people of Shiwu Town in front of the immortals!"

Seeing the old man blow up in anger, the youth's face darkened. He didn't dare to say another word. Only when his grandfather had turned around did he mumble his dissatisfaction under his breath, "Are immortals so great?"

Right then, a brutal lightning strike suddenly descended from the sky, falling only a short distance from them. The youth was caught off guard and immediately went pale in fear. He put aside his earlier pettiness and hurried to ask as soon as the thunderous sounds had subsided, "Grandpa, why is the thunder so unusual today?"

Before the old man could reply, numerous other lightning bolts had fallen continuously like raindrops, causing the entire night sky to turn white. Fear appeared on the old man's face as he hurriedly pulled the youth into a kneel next to him, prostrating before the heavenly might. He murmured his prayers under his breath, too scared to move. The birds and beasts in the forest were so frightened they didn't dare show their faces. Even the grass and the trees were quivering too.

They didn't know how much time had passed before the thunderous roars finally went away. There were some lingering aftershocks in the air, and the earth seemed to still be trembling.

For a long while, the youth couldn't hear a single sound. He had been thoroughly shocked, and didn't dare to make any insolent remarks.

Only when the shower had passed, and the clouds had parted to reveal the hazy and gloomy moon, did the trembling youth finally move to help the old man up. They then continued their journey.

Liulang asked, "Grandpa, there must have been dozens of lightning strikes earlier, this... The Mingming Valley couldn't have been demolished just like that, right?"

"Don't speak out of turn," the old man scolded in a low voice. As they made their way through the mud, the footsteps he left altered between deep and shallow due to his limp. He lowered his voice and said, "There must have been an immortal undergoing the Heavenly Tribulation."

"Tribulation?"

"The immortals' path of cultivation isn't easy, they must experience numerous calamities. I heard that among them, the Heavenly Tribulation is the deadliest. Countless immortals have lost their lives to the Heavenly

Tribulation, but if they could survive it, their cultivation would increase greatly, and they would be a step closer to truly sharing their life with the heaven and the earth.” As the old man spoke, a hint of uncertainty passed across his face, “I’d heard from my grandfather in the past, he had seen an immortal undergo the Heavenly Tribulation once. At that time, there had only been nine lightning strikes, but why was it so dangerous for this one... Could it be, the person undergoing the Heavenly Tribulation was a formidable master like the Valley Lord?”

As they spoke, the small winding trail suddenly came to a turn. The way ahead of them opened up to a clear space, revealing the valley’s complete appearance.

The mountain valley was clear and bright under the moon, its vast expanse stretching into the distance. After the shower, flowers were blooming as far as the eyes could see. The moonlight was like a thin veil, casting an ethereal color over the valley, as if the place was a paradise within the mortal world.

The young man exclaimed in joyful surprise, “Grandpa, look, we’ve...”

Before he could finish his words, the entirety of his person had frozen in shock.

At the end of the flowery slope was a large plain, its surroundings marked with a circle of carvings that the common folk couldn’t understand. At the moment, the large open area had been burned black by the lightning strikes, making a stark contrast between the inside and outside of the circle — outside, the flowers were in full bloom; inside, not a single blade of grass was left.

But on the thoroughly charred ground, a person was standing perfectly upright.

That person's long robes had been reduced to rags, the sleeves burned to shreds. Looking from behind, this person had a rather tall stature, so it was probably a man.

There was a hundred *zhang* in between them, but that person seemed to have heard Liulang's voice and turned to look at them. Even though this person's clothes were in tatters, his features were extraordinarily distinct and handsome. Under the pale glow of the moon, there was the impression that he was made of jade. His eyes seemed to contain a layer of frost that had been accumulated through the years — as soon as Liulang met his gaze, he immediately felt chilled from the top of his head to the tips of his feet, and became so frightened that he didn't dare to move the slightest bit.

The next moment, Liulang was pulled by his grandfather and they both knelt on the ground. The old man repeatedly kowtowed toward that man, "Greetings to the immortal, this lowly one came from Shiwu Town outside the valley. We've come to ask for help this time, and harbor no malicious intention to intrude, please do not take offense."

That man was stunned for a bit, but then he casually waved his hand. Liulang felt an autumn-like chill spreading around him. It was a bit cold, but not freezing. And then his body went light — both he and his grandfather had been lifted up by that chill.

This immortal was surprisingly good-natured. Not only did he not give them any trouble, he also spoke to them quite politely, "It's alright, there is no need to be so courteous — the affairs outside the valley aren't for me to handle, please wait while I summon someone for you."

After he finished speaking, he snapped his fingers to produce a bolt of white light, which went straight toward the horizon. A moment later, a small ball of light, which seemed like a firefly, flew toward them at a high speed.

When it came close, Liulang saw that it was a Daoist child flying on his sword.

The Daoist child put away his sword as he landed, respectfully making an obeisance to the man in tatters, “Elder Cheng, congratulations for surviving a Major Heavenly Tribulation, and for your cultivation going up another level.”

“There’s nothing to congratulate, I was almost scorched through,” the man replied mildly and pointed at the grandfather-grandchild pair behind him, “They came from outside, probably because they need help. Take care of them.”

After giving these simple orders, he gave Liulang and his grandfather a quick nod. Then his figure turned into a blur, quickly disappearing.

This heaven-defying ability had stunned Liulang. Even as the Daoist child came forward to invite them into the valley, his mind was still filled with the figure of that man, standing in the middle of the charred ground and casually turning back to glance at them.

Liulang off-handedly thought, that person didn’t seem to be much older than himself, but he was already an ‘Elder’ in this Mingming Valley? He couldn’t help envying that person, but then he recalled that piercing, frost-like gaze, and quickly pushed that envy back down. A feeling of awe and veneration appeared in his heart, and he didn’t dare to think disrespectful thoughts anymore.

The Daoist child procured a leaf from his robe, placed it at his mouth, and blew out a disorderly little tune. From the skies, a neighing sound came in response. A white horse descended with a carriage attached to it, snorted in a demonstration of its might, and landed on the ground steadily.

The Daoist child said amiably, “If it weren’t for the blessing from you two, I might not have been able to speak to him today. Please get on.”

The two common folks anxiously got into the flying horse carriage. Liulang was young, so he said without much thought, “Immortal Brother, was that person an elder in the valley?”

The old man was worried that he would say the wrong thing and hurriedly tugged at him, saying in fear and trepidation, “Please don’t take offense, this child...”

“It’s alright, Sir,” the Daoist child steered the flying horse and spoke quite energetically, “There’s an icy lake in our Mingming Valley, it’s so cold that I don’t even dare to go near. It is said that any water that goes within one *zhang* of the lake would be frozen, but the mystical water within the lake never ceases its flow. That senior had started living there at some point, opening a cave at the side of the lake. He contained the coldness of the entire lake in that cave and continuously cultivated in that extremely cold place. Look, the valley can be so full of life now because he had subdued that icy lake. He rarely ever showed his face, we secretly call him the ‘Elder of the Ethereal Lake’.”

Liulang was stunned by those words and couldn’t help saying, “How cold is that place, isn’t he scared?”

The Daoist child smiled, “Those who tread the path of cultivation should be able to withstand all sorts of difficulties. If they don’t have the determination, how could they achieve the Great Dao?”

As they spoke, the carriage had risen and descended a few times. After reaching the center of the valley, it slowly landed on the ground.

When Liulang got off and looked around, he saw that this place had all sorts of pavilions and buildings, with streams of water flowing freely. There was nobody in the tranquil silence other than the few cranes occasionally rising and descending. As they walked in, Liulang felt his body turn light. He looked down in surprise and saw that the mud and rainwater accumulated on his body through the entire night had completely vanished, and his body felt quite warm.

The Daoist child led them both into a small pavilion, and amid their endless gratitude, poured them a cup of warm tea. Then he asked the reason for their visit.

The old man sighed, “This... Ah, this is a long story. The trivial matters of the common people shouldn’t have been burdened on the immortals, but in recent days, some sort of evil spirit had come to bring harm upon the village, specifically targeting the children. Only a little over ten days had passed, but four to five boys had gone missing in the surrounding towns and villages. After a few days, their corpses were found in the wilderness, mostly eaten by the beasts. We’ve reported this case to the authorities, and they’d sent a few coroners over. The coroners said that those children had been drained of their blood before they lost their lives.”

When the Daoist child heard this, his smiling face turned serious, “What? Their blood had been drained? How old were those boys?”

The old man murmured ‘such calamity’ under his breath before answering, “All of them weren’t even ten years old. Because something like this had happened, the adults kept guard outside for quite a few nights, and then... And then, on that day, we had all seen a white figure. From afar, it looked like white silk suspended in the air, but in a heartbeat, it was right in front of us. Before anyone could react, someone had screamed. When we looked, one of the men had a hole in his chest. Somehow, that thing had carved his heart out in the blink of an eye. Even the government agents were

frightened, they said that the authorities can't handle evil spirits acting up, so this old one has come to the valley to ask for help from you immortals."

Hearing these, the Daoist child asked a few more questions in detail and said, "I have a general picture in my head now. Don't worry, Sir. You and this young one can rest in the valley for the night while I report this to the seniors, we will give you an answer tomorrow."

And so, the old man and his grandson stayed in Mingming Valley for the night. The wind was fresh in the valley and there was the faint scent of flowers in the air — it was a splendid place. But Liulang couldn't sleep for some reason. The image of that young senior who had experienced the Lightning Tribulation refused to leave his mind. As midnight came around, he suddenly heard people speaking outside. They were very far away, so Liulang could only hear parts of their words.

A man's voice spoke, "Yes, I've heard on my way here, but since it's causing trouble in a village of common folks, it might not be a troublesome one... Hmm, let's have Cheng Qian go to look on his way off."

An older man's voice also spoke up, "Alright. He has experienced seven Heavenly Tribulations, now he has basically regained his life through tribulations. It's about time for him to leave."

Liulang was originally unable to sleep, but when he heard these words, he suddenly felt drowsiness crawling on him out of nowhere. In the blink of an eye, he had fallen asleep and could no longer hear anything.

Two men passed outside his window one after the other, going toward the icy lake in the middle of the valley. The one walking in front was an old man whose face was youthful and energetic despite his fully white hair. He was so fat that his body was round like a ball, and when he smiled, you could only see his teeth and not his eyes. He was wearing an extremely

gaudy set of satin robes, all sorts of tassels and pouches hanging from his waistband messily. His attire was extraordinarily garish, just like a counselor of the common folk — he was the Lord of Mingming Valley, Nian Mingming.

Behind Nian Mingming was a scholarly middle-aged man who had extremely gentle facial features. Looking closely, he seemed to be the primordial spirit that had escaped from the Spirit-Consuming Lamp back then, Tang Zhen.

Through some unknown methods, Tang Zhen had regained a physical body. But this physical body didn't seem to be a very good one, vaguely carrying a deathly and sickly aura. It was unclear whether he had used body-possession or some other shady practices.

Tang Zhen was holding a white lantern in his hand. The lantern had no candle, but there was a gentle glow inside the paper. It seemed to be some kind of artifact. Tang Zhen said, "This idea was originally the wildest fantasy I have ever had, it was completely unheard of. Not even I had expected him to really succeed."

Nian Mingming smiled, "His physical body had met an untimely end, so he had undergone the Tribulation of Man. But on the verge of death, he suddenly had an epiphany, so his soul was able to enter the Spirit-Condensing Jade. The Spirit-Condensing Jade was a celestial artifact which could gather the essence of the lands. It shouldn't be possible for souls to enter the jade so easily, but at such a young age, this boy was able to keep his soul from dispersing and successfully maintained his consciousness, hanging on inside the Spirit-Condensing Jade for forty-nine years. With no physical body, he had somehow cultivated his primordial spirit in the jade, so he had also undergone the Earthly Tribulation. Forty-nine years ago, you brought the Spirit-Condensing Jade to my Mingming Valley, and with the Spirit-Condensing Jade as the base, continued to mould his body for

another forty-nine years with the icy lake. Let's not mention him withstanding the extreme cold, he had also experienced seven Heavenly Tribulations — ah, he is only a little over one hundred years old, but he has gone through the Three Tribulations of Heaven, Earth, and Man... This old one has lived for so many years, but I've never seen anything like this child's unyielding resolution."

As he spoke, Nian Mingming patted his own belly and spoke with a complicated look, "If this old one had half of his determination, I would've been an old man who still has a waistline."

Tang Zhen, "..."

A formidable master of this old man's level should have long since achieved inedia, but he couldn't help his gluttony, so this fat body of his had been built through the years and had been tested by time.

After being left speechless for a while, Tang Zhenren said with a solemn face, "I haven't thanked the Valley Lord for lending the icy lake."

Nian Mingming waved his hand, "What are you talking about. With him to subdue the icy lake, those worthless disciples of mine don't need to suffer from the cold, so we've also enjoyed comfort. Moreover, having someone like him be an 'Elder' in my lowly Mingming Valley is such an honor, we would be grateful to benefit from association with him."

"I owe this young one a favor, so when Wen Daoyou brought the Spirit-Condensing Jade to me back then, I had to figure out a way to help him," Tang Zhen said, "But even if chances had allowed him to cultivate a primordial spirit in the Spirit-Condensing Jade, cultivating a physical body from the jade had truly never happened before, so I didn't know whether he would succeed. I was worried that when too much time had passed, he would grow anxious because of his worries, so I extracted his past

memories. Now, he has experienced seven Heavenly Tribulations, and has successfully cultivated his body from the Spirit-Condensing Jade. It's time for me to return what rightfully belongs to him."

As they spoke, the two of them had reached the icy lake. When they approached, the cold became a bit unbearable for Tang Zhen, so he quickly made a seal with his hands, and the deathly aura on his face became heavier.

Moving further forward, they could hear the sound of splashing water. The master of this place had just finished bathing and was exiting the freezing lake. Nian Mingming said aloud, "Cheng Qian Xiaoyou [1], have we disturbed your peace?"

It wasn't the first time this fatty had disturbed his peace. Everyone in Mingming Valley was very talkative and noisy for some reason, so Cheng Qian was used to it.

He didn't feel any particular discomfort from their presence. He walked out from the misty lake of ice, picked up his robe — which had been frozen at the side of the lake — and draped it over his body. Within three steps, his hair, which had been covered in shards of ice, had completely dried. The robe on his body had also fallen around his body naturally. His cultivation, moulded through countless trials, had reached a stage where it could affect the surroundings soundlessly.

Cheng Qian nodded at them, "Valley Lord — Tang-xiong, I was planning to pay you a visit, would you like to come in? It's a little cold here, though."

It was midsummer, but there was no hint of heat in the lakeside cave. Walking in, one would be greeted with the sight of ice and frost mercilessly covering every surface. Even the chairs had been frozen in place, sheets of ice frozen over them. Cheng Qian moved his fingers in a slight pinching

motion, producing a warm ball of fire at his fingertips. It settled under one of the chairs, immediately evaporating the ice over it without burning the chair.

Cheng Qian said, “Tang-xiong’s physique isn’t very good, please sit in a warmer spot.”

As for the Valley Lord, Nian Mingming, Cheng Qian paid him no mind. The old fatty had thick skin and fat, he could withstand the cold.

The water in the teapot on the table had long since frozen into cold, hard ice. Cheng Qian picked up the teapot and swayed it a few times. With the energy he sent toward it, the block of ice melted, and after a while, began producing steam. He poured each of his visitors a cup of warm water.

Tang Zhen received the cup to warm his hands and placed the lantern in front of Cheng Qian, “It’s time to return this to you. On this path of yours, you have regained another chance at life, which is a remarkable accomplishment. In the future, you need to be more careful.”

Cheng Qian wasn’t surprised. He clearly knew that Tang Zhen had extracted his memories of the past. He nodded, brought the small ball of light into his sleeve with a wave of his hand, and said solemnly, “I will remember Tang-xiong’s grace in helping me gain this physical body. If there is anything in the future that you need help with, Cheng Qian shall not hesitate to risk life and limb for you.”

[1] ‘Xiaoyou’ The phrase used here is , which literally means ‘young friend’. It’s similar to ‘Daoyou’, except it’s commonly used for younger

fellow cultivators.

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In the early morning, a road for trade in Jiangnan was shrouded in vapor due to the intense heat. A company of travelling merchants hurrying on their journey were stopped by government officials.

“Hold it! What are you selling? Come down for us to check.”

Each of the government officials who’d stopped them looked worn out. It was evident that they had been guarding this road for the entire night. The odd thing was, behind the large group of government officials, there were two middle-aged men wearing Daoist robes. The two of them didn’t stand with the others, only sitting a small distance away, overseeing them without a care.

The manager of the merchant group hurriedly got off his horse, greeting obsequiously, “Officer, Sir, we’re bringing leather from the north to sell here. We’re all doing honest business, please grant us a favor...”

As he spoke, he brought out a small pouch to hand over with a practiced move.

A hint of greed passed over the government official’s face. He was about to receive the pouch, but he suddenly seemed to recall something and hesitated. He stole a glance to the two cultivators not far behind him, clenched his teeth, and pushed the pouch back with a scowl, “What are you doing? You unscrupulous merchants, why won’t you carry out your business properly, where did you learn this kind of dishonest practices? Scram!”

And then he waved his hand, “Search them!”

The manager could only follow the government officials helplessly, “Ah, Officers, wait... We can’t sell the goods if you break them, Officers...”

The merchant group had a line of large carriages, which did contain leather as they claimed. Because the government officials couldn’t find anything, the leader’s face turned sour. He turned to point at the ridiculously large carriage at the very end, “What’s in that one?”

The manager hurriedly said, “To answer the officer’s question, that’s our young master’s private vehicle...”

“Young master?” The leader laughed coldly, “What kind of young master would sit in such a large carriage by himself? Even the Emperor’s grandson wouldn’t make such a great scene when he goes out, move aside!”

Before the manager could stop them, the group of government officials had surrounded the ridiculously large carriage.

The leader procured a palm-sized wooden sword and began gesticulating, as if performing a ritual against the wind, chanting like a shaman dancing in a trance — the common folk was no match for cultivators, so if they wanted to activate a charm, they had to recite the chants in full. Charms that weren’t meant to be used by the common folk would have none of those chants, and could only be spread among cultivators.

After a long while, the charm on the wooden sword was finally activated. There was a flash of green light at the tip of the wooden sword, which pointed at the carriage.

The leader immediately became excited and exclaimed, “There really are forbidden goods inside! Open up!”

What they referred to as ‘forbidden goods’ were the charms and celestial artifacts secretly sold in the common folk’s black market.

There was a law in the royal court, that every charm and celestial artifact sold to the common folk must pass the Office of Heavenly Affairs’ examination. Otherwise, if anyone with ulterior motives had bought charms that could kill and bring misfortune upon others, wouldn’t it be a disaster?

Of course, the law itself was reasonable, but this way, when the goods were delivered to the Office of Heavenly Affairs, not only would they be checked all over, the process would also take up to a year. Most of them wouldn’t even pass the examinations, only a small number could make it through, and practically all of them were snatched off by the royalty and the wealthy people. Because of this, a real celestial artifact could be sold for an extremely high price among the common folk.

As for those selling forbidden goods in secret, the royal court couldn’t rein in the cultivators, so they could only control the common folk. They made a rigid rule, if anyone dared to distribute forbidden goods in secret, it would be considered a rebellion against the court. Their whole family would be executed, their property would be confiscated, and all of their relatives would also be incriminated.

But even then, the supply of goods in the black market never stopped, as there were always desperate people who just wanted to make huge profits. In recent years, someone with the nickname ‘Money-Hustling Young Master’ had also appeared. He was said to ‘care more about money than life’, and was a mysterious ringleader in the black market.

Some people speculated that he was related to the government officials, that the government and the bandits were working together. Others believed that this person was a cultivator.

There had been all sorts of rebellions in recent years. Because the rebels had quite a large amount of forbidden goods from the black market, the royal court had a very hard time sorting out the riots. Their hatred for these black market dealers deepened, and they became more and more thorough with their search. Practically every trade road had people searching irregularly, and they had even sent some masters from the Office of Heavenly Affairs.

At the leader's exclamation, the two cultivators behind him exchanged a look and came forward — they saw that the carriage was, in fact, outrageously large. It was so huge that it had practically filled up about half of the road. Before the manager could stop him, the officials' leader had reached out to pull the curtain. The person inside also happened to raise his face.

That person seemed to be a young man, about twenty years old, and was lazily half-reclining inside the carriage. His attire was quite luxurious. With a book in his hand, he swept his half-lidded eyes toward the outside. His form was just like the celestial fox spirit in myths, causing the government official's leader to be stunned.

The inside of the carriage was even more extravagant than the outside. It was the peak of summer, but there was ice inside the carriage, which was chilling a glittering and translucent jar of plum liquor.

As soon as the fox-like young man saw the officials' leader, he immediately scrunched up his brows and violently used the book in his hand to hide his face, snapping in anger, "Where did this abomination come from, get rid of it, its hideousness is killing me!"

Those words caused the leader to immediately regain his senses. The leader struggled to regain his composure, stuttering, “Im, im-impudent! You’re carrying forbidden goods, this is an act of rebellion that can cost you your life! You’re still not su-su-surrendering yourself?”

“Forbidden goods?” The young man cocked his brow. “You mean this?”

There was a peculiar ring on one of his slender fingers. The top of the ring was carved in the shape of a copper coin. Before the official could see what kind of material it was made of, a white blur suddenly appeared from the copper coin, forming the half-body figure of a youth. This kind of thing was unheard of, the government official couldn’t even close his mouth...

Then that youth raised his hand emotionlessly, slapped him across the face, and dispersed in the air, satisfied.

The young man looked down at him and said insincerely, “Oh, Officer, apologies, you’re standing too close. This is not a forbidden item, it’s just something I made to entertain myself. To tell you the truth, I’m feeling quite frustrated too. I wonder how to make alterations, so this darling of mine would at least talk to me — at the moment, he’s only capable of slapping people.”

The two cultivators with the government officials finally spoke up, looking at the young man coldly, “You’re also a cultivator?”

The young man in the carriage didn’t seem to have heard those words. His expression was haughty as he lounged on the small couch, not even bothering to straighten his back.

The slapped official held his own face and erupted with fury, “Xianzhang [1], this person looks suspicious, he might be that... that

‘Money-Hustling Young Master’!”

The cultivator from the Office of Heavenly Affairs asked, “Might I inquire, why does this fellow cultivator go through so many pains to travel with some common folk?”

The young man said confidently, “I’m happy to, it’s good for show.”

The cultivator was stunned. He inhaled deeply and tried again, “Then, might I inquire which sect this fellow cultivator came from?”

The young man laughed coldly, “Why should I tell you — are you done searching? Out of the way!”

Before he finished the last of his words, the young man suddenly slammed the low table inside the carriage. In between his brows, the small figure of a sword flickered. Immediately afterward, a seemingly all-conquering sword aura came toward the two cultivators.

This person seemed like a careless sloth, but he was hiding his real ability. At the very least, he had reached the level of using his primordial spirit as his sword, and could perform this act with perfect skill.

The two cultivators were caught off guard and hurriedly moved aside, not daring to meet the attack head-on. The blabbering leader of the government officials had long since passed out.

Even though the two cultivators had been cultivating for hundreds of years, they didn’t dare to offend this sword cultivator. They exchanged a look and backed off, “Apologies for offending the senior, feel free to proceed.”

If a sword cultivator could reach this point, even the most powerful formidable masters had to give some face. Someone like him had to have a steadfast resolution and will. No matter which sect's name he was carrying, he would've been an elder worshipped by tens of thousands. Why would someone like him commit such shameless acts like selling things on the black market?

The cultivators had spoken, so the underlings had to obey no matter what. In just a short moment, the government officials had cleared the way. They had even helped to put the leather back in order before seeing them off.

After moving along for a while, the manager finally released a breath in relief. He carefully came to the carriage window and said rather flatteringly. "This road is supposed to be rarely searched, but our luck seems to be bad... Today, it's all thanks to Young Master for escorting us in person."

A reply came from inside the carriage, "No need for courtesy, Boss Li. I just happen to be going in the same direction. If you truly want to express your gratitude, just help us out more regarding the prices in the future."

Boss Li immediately said, "No, no, we're the ones who have always been helped out..."

Right then, a sharp whistling sound suddenly came from the sky. A ball of fire descended onto the top of the carriage. With a thunderous rumble, a young maiden emerged from the flames.

The maiden had delicate eyebrows, with almond-shaped eyes and an oval face. She was quite charming, but her way of dressing was very unusual — she had stuck a large amount of bright-colored feathers into

the hair at the back of her head. Looking from the front, she was a beauty, but from behind, she was practically a mountain chicken with a fluffed up tail!

After sweeping her eyes over the stunned commoners, she patted her hands clean and flipped down from the roof of the carriage, squeezing inside without warning. “Da-shixiong, I’m here!”

The sword cultivator who had paved a way for himself, the one and only person who had partnered up with commoners to sell forbidden goods, was none other than Yan Zhengming.

A hundred years had passed in a blur. Back then, Yan Zhengming had brought one Shidi, one Shimei, and one Daoist child across the East Sea to the Yan house, but was met with devastation — the Yan house had been sentenced to a punishment and had its property confiscated eight years prior. Once, they had been so powerful that it seemed like they could command the wind and rain, but now, only the grass on the tombs remained.

They had no other choice but to start cultivating in misery, wandering from place to place. In order to survive, they had fought for a *Yao* cultivator’s cave dwelling, entered uninhabited mysterious territories, and loitered in the black market of forbidden goods. With nobody to rely on, they had struggled in this difficult situation for a hundred years.

To be honest, they had only been able to start meeting Sect Leader Yan’s standards as a young master in the past couple of years.

The moment Shuikeng entered the carriage, Yan Zhengming raised his hand and destroyed her hairdo from across the distance, scattering the

chicken feathers on her hair all over the place. Shuikeng screamed, “Ah, my feathers! I have no face to see people now!”

Yan Zhengming said, “I’m the one who has no face to see people — why are you here, are you purposefully trying to blind me?”

Shuikeng piteously picked up her feathers, blew away the dust, and tucked them into her robes carefully. “There’s been a lot of rumors from Shuzhong lately. At first they said that some great evil overlord had left something behind, and then we just heard that a demonic cultivator had appeared there. Er-shixiong couldn’t stay sitting around, so he’s gone there first and sent me here to tell you.”

Hearing this, Yan Zhengming’s brows furrowed. They had always been searching for Han Yuan, who had gone missing after jumping into the sea back then, but they couldn’t find any news of him. Whenever they heard rumors of any demonic being, they would always go for a look... even if they felt that there was little to no hope.

Yan Zhengming knew that this would be another futile effort, but they had no other choice. He sighed and finished his plum liquor in one gulp. “Let’s go, bid our farewells to Boss Li.”

Shuzhong, Mingming Valley.

Near daybreak, Cheng Qian finally used the excuse that Tang Zhen was feeling unwell to send away Nian Mingming, who was extremely enthusiastic about discussing sword techniques with him.

Nian Mingming wasn’t a sword user. Usually, people who couldn’t see their own toes when they look down would be more suited for shorter weapons, because it was safer that way. But the Valley Lord felt very strongly about the path of swords, for some reason.

Cheng Qian believed that in Valley Lord Nian's heart was probably a beautiful young man in flowing white robes, so he had an extreme yearning for things he couldn't have.

Like swords, for example... and a waist.

After agreeing to the Valley Lord's request to check on the village outside, Cheng Qian saw Nian Mingming and Tang Zhen off. Then he returned alone to the land of extreme cold that he'd secluded himself in for the last fifty years, and pulled out the small bundle of his past that Tang Zhen had given him.

He knew that his physical body had died, that his soul had entered the Spirit-Condensing Jade by chance, and remained in the jade for decades before it was found by Wen Ya Zhenren.

Tang Zhen was a forthright person. When he entered the Spirit-Condensing Jade as a primordial spirit all those years ago, he had extracted Cheng Qian's decades of memories right in front of him. Now, Cheng Qian had finally made a breakthrough. He was originally impatient about finally holding his past, but at that moment, he was suddenly overtaken with the complicated feeling of anticipation and fear.

In the past years, Cheng Qian would occasionally find some scattered fragments in his mind. Like the inexplicable feeling that there should be a sword in his hand, that there should be a bamboo forest where he lived, or that there should be the calming fragrance of orchids in his bedding...

The small bundle of memories that Tang Zhen had returned to him didn't have a strong light, but it was most definitely not dim either. Cheng Qian turned it over in his hands for a while, and didn't see the slightest fissure.

The pale white light seemed cold, but holding it in his hand gave him so much warmth. It stood out greatly in this land of ice and frost.

Cheng Qian abruptly took a deep breath and blinked, casting off the frost that had accumulated on his eyelashes while he was distracted. His fingers had only loosened slightly, but his past memories were like a bird returning to its nest, sinking into the space between his brows with more urgency than its owner.

In that instance, the years of his youth finally came back to him from beyond the century of struggles. It felt as if he was waking up from a great dream for the first time. Every vague detail that he had brushed off in the past seemed like they had been enhanced with a brush of ink, so vibrant that they seemed just like yesterday.

Going up to Fuyao, leaving for Azure Dragon Island, wielding Shuangren, a fallen blade, the enlightenment on the uninhabited island, the orchid on Shixiong's collar, the suffering in the Spirit-Condensing Jade...

All these happenings weren't as simple as 'the past'.

When Cheng Qian opened his eyes again, the sky had turned bright. His eyes were burning intensely. The icy lake had moulded his heart so that it was calm as still water, but it couldn't stop the longing and yearning of a hundred years from piercing his heart.

No wonder Tang Zhen and Nian Mingming were so convinced that he would leave after regaining his memories.

Cheng Qian got to his feet and came to the edge of the icy lake, then reached out with a clutching motion. The originally stagnant lake water rose suddenly, forming a sword of ice in the air, which fell into his hand.

The ground around the icy lake was extremely solid, but it was no match for the ice sword's sharpness.

In one fell swoop, Cheng Qian drew a circle of extremely complicated charms around the icy lake. After he finished, the ice sword finally couldn't handle the force of his energy and shattered into pieces. When the fragments fell, they surprisingly began to melt — the coldness of the icy lake had been sealed.

Just in case there was nobody to suppress the icy lake after his departure, Cheng Qian's charms could seal the coldness for ten or twenty years. By that time, if the old fatty couldn't copy the charms, he could come back to fix it himself.

He refused to neglect anyone to whom he owed a debt of gratitude.

When Cheng Qian came to the Valley Lord's pavilion to bid his farewells, the grandfather-grandson pair who had come to ask for help the previous day had already been sent home. There was only Nian Mingming, who looked at him with the complicated gaze of a father marrying off his daughter. He raised his sleeve to dab at the corner of his eyes, murmuring, "After you leave, we don't know when we'll meet again."

What an eyesore. Cheng Qian felt that it would be better if they never met again.

Nian Mingming went on, "If you ever encounter any trouble outside the valley, you're always welcome to come back. When the time comes, you don't need to stay in the icy lake, I'll have someone prepare a cave dwelling for you."

Cheng Qian's heart abruptly softened. Before it could soften completely, the old fatty had continued again, "I've told the disciples in the valley, if they ever get picked on by others when they travel outside, they can use your name. Xiaoyou, you must bear the responsibility!"

Cheng Qian, "..."

He turned around to leave, about to cut off all ties with this place right then and there, but Nian Mingming hurriedly called out to him, "Wait, Xiaoyou, I've prepared a sword for you!"

When Cheng Qian looked back, he was greeted with a glaring flash, but fortunately wasn't blinded — Valley Lord Nian was holding a sword bedecked with jewels. The sword scabbard was embedded full of gold-rimmed jade. That was still fine, but the embeddings were in the form of the Four Gentlemen: plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum [2]. Each of the Four Gentlemen were more imposing and overbearing than the previous one, all of them crudely shoved together, like the four big words of greeting in Chinese New Year [3].

The corner of Cheng Qian's lips twitched. He said with false courtesy, "Valley Lord, it would be better for you to keep it for yourself."

Nian Mingming sighed, saying with a strange air of self-satisfaction, "Ah, that's right. Xiaoyou has undergone seven Heavenly Tribulations before leaving the valley, you will definitely rise to become a formidable master. We're just a small, insignificant sect, we truly have nothing to offer you..."

Before he could finish his words, his hand suddenly turned empty. When he looked, Cheng Qian had taken the moneybag sword. With a short 'many thanks', he spun around to depart on the sword, leaving a glittering glow behind to shine on the sunlit Mingming Valley.

A Daoist child peered in from the entrance and said to the beaming Nian Mingming, “Valley Lord, the Elder of the Ethereal Lake has left?”

“He’s left,” Nian Mingming said cheerfully, but suddenly sighed with emotion, “Ah, capable people like them are meant to command the wind and rain, and experience all sorts of trials. People like us, who are fortunate and untalented, can only enjoy a leisurely life behind — Tong-er, what is it?”

“Oh,” the Daoist child said flatly, “I came to tell you, the little Shishu has run off again!”

Nian Mingming, “...”

[1] ‘*Xianzhang*’ The phrase used here is , which is mostly used by commoners to address cultivators.

[2] ‘*the Four Gentlemen: plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum*’ The phrase used here is . Put simply, the Four Gentlemen are used to signify the noble qualities of a wise man, which would be in Chinese. Here’s a brief explanation, translated by yours truly:

Braving through trials and snow, the plum is noble and unsullied A delicate fragrance in the deep valley, the orchid is virtuous and honorable Elegant and untouched by worldly desires, the bamboo is modest and righteous Graceful and pure as frost, the chrysanthemum is aloof and distant

[3] *'four big words of greeting in Chinese New Year'* The phrase used here is , the most common greeting said in Chinese New Year. You'll see many decorations with these four words in large, garish fonts around that time if you live in a Chinese community.

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[T/N: In accordance to the results of [this poll](#), from this chapter onward, the translation will use ‘Shifu’ instead of ‘Master’ when used as a form of address.]

Cheng Qian had barely taken two steps out of the valley when he suddenly turned his head to the side and reached out with a clutching motion. He heard an exclamation of ‘aiyo’, and a clumsy, seemingly good-natured youth tumbled down from a large tree at the valley’s exit.

That person had landed first, but the traveling bag he was carrying fell a little later and happened to land on that person’s head. The bag seemed to contain some kind of heavy object, because it created a loud, dull thump when it collided with a human skull. The youth’s eyes immediately rolled back in his head as he fell backward. It would seem that he had died before he could complete his apprenticeship.

Cheng Qian, “...”

Even though Cheng Qian knew basically no one other than the Valley Lord in the Mingming Valley, there was no mistaking this one of a kind manner. He could tell with one look that this was the Valley Lord’s disciple.

Right when he was about to leave, the knocked out youth slowly regained consciousness. The moment he saw Cheng Qian, the youth's face immediately lit up with happiness. With the fist-sized bump on his head, he energetically threw himself at Cheng Qian's feet, yelling, "Senior! I've been waiting for you here for half a night, Senior!"

Those words felt a bit awkward for Cheng Qian. It kind of gave the impression of two people who had promised to elope, but one of them failed to keep their word.

He coughed drily, "No need for courtesy... uh, and don't call me 'Senior'."

The youth was dumbfounded, "Oh, then Elder Cheng. I want to go out for a journey, please take me with you... Uh, you also don't like 'Elder'? Then what should I address you as? Cheng Shishu! No, I know! Cheng... Cheng... Cheng Shifu! I might as well become your disciple!"

Cheng Qian, "..."

Seeing that the youth was ready to kneel right then and there, about to present soil in the place of tea to initiate himself as a disciple, Cheng Qian immediately reached out to pull him up, "Don't, I have no plans to take disciples for now. Who is your master in the valley?"

The youth said casually, "Nobody, I've just been blindly training with the Valley Lord. The Valley Lord is my father, he won't mind me entering other people's sect."

Hearing that not-so-surprising answer, Cheng Qian couldn't help remarking sarcastically with an emotionless face, "Oh, no wonder. The pupil truly surpasses the master."

The youth seemed pleased hearing those words. He truly thought that it was a genuine compliment and hurriedly said out of modesty, “No, no, this junior still has a lot to learn.”

“...” Cheng Qian weakly pinched the space between his brows and asked, “What’s your name?”

The youth stuck his chest out and answered proudly, “Nian Dada!”

Even the most hypocritical person couldn’t go against their conscience to praise that name. In that moment, Cheng Qian was finally certain that Valley Lord Nian’s brain must have been damaged by something in the past.

Cheng Qian refused to take him as a disciple, but Nian Dada didn’t care. He kept persistently chasing him after picking up his traveling bag, sticking close to Cheng Qian like a bum beetle. While trailing after Cheng Qian, he asked brazenly, “Sen... Cheng Shishu, where are we going?”

This was clearly an attempt at striking up pointless conversation. Cheng Qian didn’t care to entertain him, so he pretended not to hear those words. Nian Dada didn’t mind. When he received no response, he started monologuing, “Nonsense, of course we’re going to Shiwu Town — then Shishu, in your opinion, what is the evil spirit in Shiwu Town?”

He also didn’t expect Cheng Qian to answer him this time, so he just answered himself, “No matter what it is, wreaking havoc isn’t allowed, so we must get rid of it!”

Cheng Qian finally cut off his one-man show, asking, “You left the valley all by yourself, did your father agree?”

“My father doesn’t care,” Nian Dada said, “Shishu, don’t worry. For the people of Mingming Valley, as soon as they complete their apprenticeship,

they're completely free.”

Cheng Qian could feel his teeth aching. He wondered what kind of ‘master’ would produce this kind of apprentice.

Nian Dada was able to figure out his thoughts for once, and explained a bit hesitantly, “Shishu is always cultivating in seclusion, so you probably don’t know. The rule of our sect has always been ‘A high level of cultivation isn’t necessary, just a little skill is fine, as long as you don’t cause trouble outside... even if you’ve caused trouble, don’t mention the sect’s name’.”

Cheng Qian immediately became speechless.

Nian Dada continued, “Anyhow, going out for a journey means having fun and enjoying oneself, and getting rid of some evil along the way — oh, we need to pick the ones we can defeat, of course. If we can’t defeat them, find a stronger senior.”

Cheng Qian looked down at the sword from the Valley Lord and understood then — of course, this was for him to pawn off along the way for travel expenses.

All of a sudden, he randomly recalled something and couldn’t help smiling.

Nian Dada immediately turned into a strangled duck and was stunned speechless.

Usually, when the fellow disciples of Mingming Valley gathered, they’d often discuss the Elder of the Ethereal Lake — what kind of person could cultivate in seclusion for decades at the icy lake? Could it be, when he came out, he wouldn’t even be able to speak?

What kind of person could undergo so many Heavenly Tribulations and remain unscathed?

He was practically not a human!

Nian Dada seemed very energetic in front of Cheng Qian, but due to his inexplicable worship to this young elder, he had actually been very nervous all this time. His legs were trembling under his robes.

Seeing his stunned look, Cheng Qian asked in confusion, “What is it?”

Nian Dada immediately pinched himself hard, “I-I-I... Uh, that, this...”

“Don’t be nervous, I was just thinking of our sect leader. He’s a bit similar to your father,” Cheng Qian was in the mood to talk, for once, “Oh, I meant their way of thinking, of course. My Shixiong still has a waist.”

Nian Dada immediately grinned and started buttering him up, “How could it be? How can he be similar to my father? Then how could he nurture a formidable person like Shishu?”

But this time, his attempts at flattery had failed.

Cheng Qian was stunned by those words. The slight hint of a smile on his face immediately disappeared. He lowered his head and started toward the village in the distance. After a long while, he finally spoke in a low voice, all sorts of feelings welling up in his heart, “I don’t know, maybe... his fortune was bad.”

Cheng Qian never said explicitly that he would take him along, but Nian Dada had finally found someone to cling to, so he still followed Cheng Qian persistently.

About a half *li* from the village, Cheng Qian noticed that something was off. Without a change in his facial expression, he gathered his energy to his eyes, and saw that the surrounding villages and townships were shrouded in a bloody light.

It stretched into the dark horizon, gathering a large amount of ominous, murky clouds.

Cheng Qian's brows knitted. This was very unusual — he didn't think that something with this kind of ability would be some kind of easily-handled stray lonely soul.

One must keep in mind that the higher a cultivator's skill was, the more deeply-rooted their education was in them [1]. Something like carving out a man's heart — a defenseless commoner, at that — was practically a barbaric action not unlike wild beasts. Even a real demonic cultivator wouldn't commit such atrocious acts.

Could it be, the true perpetrator was purposefully creating a false impression, so that the people of Mingming Valley would think that this 'evil spirit' was a mere worthless rogue cultivator?

If that were the case, one wouldn't have used a great sword to slay a chicken. If Cheng Qian hadn't happened to be on his way down the mountain, the Valley Lord probably would've sent an average, inexperienced Daoist child to solve the problem.

And then... what?

As Cheng Qian's mind raced, a thought suddenly occurred to him — the unknown perpetrator's true aim was most possibly not these common villagers, but the cultivators in Mingming Valley!

He immediately suppressed his own aura. In an instant, the ice-cold, intimidating pressure around his body, which was unique to those who had cultivated their own primordial spirit, immediately disappeared. When he walked with Nian Dada, they seemed like a pair of martial brothers whose cultivation levels weren't too far apart.

Nian Dada seemed to be an extremely carefree person. He didn't notice the bloody aura above the village or the change in Cheng Qian, and continued chattering while walking in front, "When I was small, I had come out to play once. Shishu, did you see that there? Looks like a villager's here to welcome us!"

Liulang, who'd returned earlier, had been waiting respectfully for a long time. When he saw them, he hurriedly came forward. But Liulang never expected that Cheng Qian would be the one to come, and was so overwhelmed by the unexpected favor that he couldn't even think straight, and became unable to speak for some time.

"Are the corpses still here? Take me to see them." Cheng Qian didn't care for pleasantries and went right past him toward the village.

Liulang came back to himself and immediately caught up to him, "Y-yes, Xianzhang... That, please sit for a bit, I-I'll ask someone to pour you some tea..."

Cheng Qian waved his hand, "No need, I'm not used to drinking hot water. We'd better look first..."

His words were abruptly cut off. He was shocked by how desolate the village was.

This place was truly run down. Hearing that cultivators were coming, practically all the villagers had come out to watch from the sidelines. Each

of these people looked famished, their clothes in tatters. In the entirety of such a large village, not even a single tile-roofed house could be found. Some of the thatched huts looked like they had been carelessly rebuilt after being destroyed. Even the few dogs that occasionally ran past were so skinny that they were practically skin and bones, their eyes so ferocious they seemed like wolves.

They didn't dare to approach Cheng Qian, so they only glared at Nian Dada with those cautious and fierce eyes.

These dogs had definitely eaten raw flesh and tasted fresh blood.

Cheng Qian might have spent the last hundred years away from the mortal world, but his birth place had been an impoverished village too. The Cheng family was also utterly destitute, so he was quite experienced with living in poverty. And yet, despite that, this place had still helped him gain more of an understanding of the world.

Liulang explained hesitantly next to him, "Xianzhang probably doesn't leave Mingming Valley much, so you don't know. The previous two years had been a chain of disasters, and then there was the Anping King's armed rebellion, which had lasted three years. The royal court also keeps demanding forced labor and taxes... We still haven't recovered, our service might be lacking, Xianzhang, I hope you don't mind..."

Cheng Qian shook his head. His feelings were a bit complicated.

Only then did he finally experience the feeling of returning to the mortal world after a hundred years of struggles. He suddenly felt that the extremely ostentatious 'travel expense sword' in his hand was an eyesore, so Cheng Qian secretly made a seal with his hand to hide the sword.

Right then, something brushed against the consciousness that he had involuntarily spread outside. Cheng Qian abruptly turned around. In the mottled shade of the trees behind him, there was nothing to be found.

Nian Dada turned around and asked carelessly, “Shishu, what are you doing? Why aren’t you coming?”

Cheng Qian thought, *We’re being watched, you dunce.*

Even though he was cursing in his heart, he showed nothing on his face. He only reined his own consciousness in and feigned ignorance, silently walking forward and following Liulang to where the corpses were.

Nian Dada came forward eagerly, “Shishu, I heard from the others’ discussion, that this seems to have been done by a demonic cultivator of the Ghostism path!”

“A Soul-Consuming Lamp? Even though it’s true that Soul-Consuming Lamps require the blood of virgin boys when tempering a ghostly spirit,” Cheng Qian said slowly, “I’ve also heard that the blood needed in the practice of Ghostism must be fresh from a living person, and not a large amount is required, so it’s definitely not enough to kill a person in one go. But when done repeatedly, that person wouldn’t be able to handle it, and their blood couldn’t be used anymore. So, the deaths caused by Soul-Consuming Lamps wouldn’t be like these people, who have been completely drained of their blood — besides, the Soul-Consuming Lamps are extremely sinister objects, would there be so many of them in this world?”

Nian Dada’s heart was immediately filled with worshipful admiration, “Shishu, why are you so knowledgeable?”

When Cheng Qian met that pair of big ignorant eyes, he suddenly felt that this brat wasn't even worthy of relieving his boredom — he was much too irritating.

It was the peak of summer, so the days-old corpses had already rotted. As soon as the shroud over the corpses was uncovered, the flies underneath began buzzing around. When they came near Cheng Qian, the flies immediately fled in fear of the cold. Under Nian Dada's admiring eyes, Cheng Qian placed his hand on a child's corpse without much concern. After a moment, a dark aura rose sharply from the corpse and went straight into the sky, morphing into a pitch black ghostly face in the air. As soon as it saw Cheng Qian, it took off in panic.

Cheng Qian frowned slightly. His figure turned into a blur as he went after it.

Nian Dada's reflexes were a bit slow. Only after a while did he exclaim a short 'aiya'. When he was about to follow, Cheng Qian was already gone.

He hurriedly pulled out a sword from his bag and shoved the rest of his things to Liulang before jumping on the sword, still calling out, "Shishu! Shishu! Wait for me!"

But Cheng Qian's figure had long since disappeared. After flying around on his sword, Nian Dada dejectedly landed back on his original spot and said sheepishly, "I lost him."

Liulang immediately said, "Xianzhang, could you take me with you? I grew up here, I'm familiar with the roads. I can take you to where that white figure had appeared."

Nian Dada looked at him awkwardly. This young one wasn't skilled, it was good enough that he could fly on his sword by himself, he couldn't possibly

take another person with him. Hearing those words, he was too embarrassed to admit the truth. He coughed drily, put away his sword, and made up an excuse, “Alright. But it’s easy to miss things in the air, it would be bad if we lost my Shishu — why don’t we walk on the ground?”

After he said that, he began digging in his bag, procuring two yellow talisman papers with cinnabar markings. Even though these things wouldn’t use up much energy, they were made from material of a particular standard that could only be used once. They were usually left by seniors in case their worthless disciples had left their sight.

Nian Dada kept picking and choosing, looking at the markings until he went cross-eyed, and finally picked out two charms for speed-traveling, which he stuck onto Liulang’s leg and his own leg, exclaiming, “Go!”

Liulang’s face abruptly turned pale as he was whisked off.

Neither of them noticed a golden cicada, which had remained unmoving on a large tree for a while, making affected, knowing gestures. It then flew off silently from the tree, trailing behind Nian Dada and Liulang. But it hadn’t gone beyond four *li* when its body went still, as if it had bumped into something.

The golden cicada circled around twice at the roadside and turned into a leaf as it landed. The leaf was split down the middle, allowing the clear Qi within it to diffuse into the clear skies, flying toward a mountain slope about fifty *li* from there.

Among the many mountains of Shuzhong, a young maiden and a man were standing on a mountain slope as they looked down. They were none other than Shuikeng, who had circled around most of China, and Li Yun.

Shuikeng said, “Da-shixiong sent me here to tell you, he’s gone to pay a visit to the Lord of Mingming Valley — since this is someone else’s territory, we can’t neglect notifying them.”

Li Yun nodded. He was about to ask something, but suddenly heard the faint buzzing sound of a bug. He raised his face and saw his glittering and translucent golden cicada flying back to him, obediently landing on his shoulder.

“The golden cicada?” Shuikeng was confused, “Could it have found the demonic cultivator so quickly?”

With a wave of Li Yun’s hand, the golden cicada dispersed in the air. A desolate village immediately appeared in front of them. A youth dressed in tatters was leading two cultivators toward the village.

As soon as the young cultivator at the front entered the golden cicada’s vision, he suddenly turned around, as if he’d noticed something. Then the image disappeared completely.

Shuikeng, “Ah...”

“It’s nothing,” Li Yun didn’t find this strange, only saying, “That person must have been a master above the level of primordial spirit, he’s hiding his cultivation for some reason. Cultivators who’ve cultivated a primordial spirit have extremely keen senses, they would notice even if you had only glanced at them a little too long. With that kind of formidable master’s presence, the golden cicada probably didn’t dare to open its eyes again along the way.”

He had just finished speaking when the image appeared again — this time, it was at a thatched hut. There was a row of corpses under the eaves of the hut. The person who’d almost discovered the golden cicada had

disappeared, the other young cultivator was yelling ‘Shishu’ repeatedly for a long time. He then flew around on his sword, was persuaded by a young villager, and brought the villager along with a Speed-Traveling Charm. The image in front of them followed those two for a while, but then the cicada seemed to have encountered something and suddenly stopped following them. The image also disappeared.

Li Yun held the cicada in his palm and said, “It sensed danger in that place, so it didn’t dare to keep following them... Hmm, after Da-shixiong has returned, we’ll go for a look.”

“Wait!” Shuikeng caught Li Yun’s shoulder and said urgently, “Er-shixiong, let’s see it again, that part in the beginning, I want to see the person that had appeared in the beginning!”

“What’s there to see? It was just a glimpse, you can’t even see clearly,” Li Yun was confused, “Didn’t that rowdy kid call him ‘Shishu’ earlier, he must be a senior in their sect, right? What is it?”

“It was exactly that blurry side profile,” Shuikeng said, “I feel that... he looked a bit similar to San-shixiong.”

[1] *‘the more deeply-rooted their education was in them’* The expression used here is *sheng yu*, which literally means ‘the life-giving spring breeze and rain’, and is commonly used to say the long-term influence of a solid education. Basically, one’s education is so deep-rooted in them that it influences their actions. This is usually said in a positive manner.

Fun fact: Nian Dada's name () sounds like (sticky, often in an unpleasant sense)

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Li Yun was stunned by those words. The smile on his face faded slightly as he asked, “What, you still remember your little Shixiong?”

“Of course I remember,” Shuikeng said, dissatisfied, “Not only do I remember how he had looked after growing up, I also remember that when we were kids, San-shixiong had doted on me the most — besides, even if I don’t remember, Da-shixiong has been painting him for almost a hundred years, how can I not recognize him?”

In the Fuyao Sect, there was the tradition of keeping a portrait of each generation’s disciples in the Library. Even if they were unable to return at the moment, Yan Zhengming had always wanted to leave one for Cheng Qian. Unfortunately, no matter how he tried to fix and redo the portraits, none of them were good enough.

Li Yun smiled, “How heartless. Don’t we dote on you too?”

As he spoke, he also looked at the image with Shuikeng. But that person’s profile only appeared for a brief instance, like a startled swan, and they couldn’t make out anything.

“Your little Shixiong had always had well-proportioned features. People with good faces probably all look quite similar, no need to make a fuss.” After a pause, Li Yun added, “Oh right, don’t tell your Da-shixiong about this. He’ll blow up at you.”

Shuikeng gave an off-handed response, but her mind was elsewhere. She shamelessly thought to herself, *This fellow looks pretty handsome, I definitely have to chat him up.*

As she thought this, she suddenly became impatient for some reason. She spread her wings and flew into the air, complaining, “Why isn’t Dashixiong back yet, is he planning to become a son-in-law in that Mingming Valley?”

Even without using her energy, Shuikeng’s eyes were naturally able to look very far. With a casual glance, she could see animals running tens of *li* away. As she aimlessly looked around, she suddenly spotted a frost-like sword glare shooting into the sky in the distance. Following that sword glare, Shuikeng finally noticed that there was a bloody aura around that place.

That sword glare brought with it a sheet of frost, rolling up like tides and sweeping away the bloody aura. Then a thick black mist scattered, as if making its escape. In the blink of an eye, it had disappeared in different directions.

Shuikeng was stunned.

Her memories, still fresh in her mind, came to the surface from beyond the harsh times they’d experienced. Back then, in the small courtyard colored in autumn shades, a youth’s interest seemed to have been piqued. He turned to smile at her, “Little Shimei, I’ll show you what Tide Swordplay is —”

She could almost see it in front of her eyes.

Shuikeng’s heartbeat sped up.

She abruptly spread her wings to their greatest expanse, ignored Li Yun's shouts, and dove to where the sword aura had come from.

As for that sword aura — Cheng Qian had chased the ghostly shadow on the corpse. He had seen the great demonic cultivator Jiang Peng with his own eyes and had spent many years with Tang Zhen, who had escaped the Soul-Consuming Lamp. He was very familiar with the malicious aura unique to the Soul-Consuming Lamp, so when the shadow first appeared, he had immediately sensed it.

At the same time, he became even more puzzled. Ghostly spirits from Soul-Consuming Lamps were usually fully-formed souls or primordial spirits — what kind of ghostly spirit would look like a piece of rag?

The rag-like shadow fled more than ten *li* and shot straight into a mountain cave.

Before he even stepped in, Cheng Qian had noticed the suffocating scent of blood from inside the cave. He didn't enter carelessly, only extending a bit of his consciousness at the entrance — if a cultivator had cultivated a primordial spirit, when they extended their consciousness, nothing could escape their eyes within a hundred *li*.

But this cave seemed as if it was shrouded in some kind of thick mist. Cheng Qian could only somewhat discern there was something deep inside the cave. Right as he was carefully circling around the entrance of the cave, he suddenly heard a clear sound behind him — with his loud voice, Nian Dada was saying at the top of his lungs, “Young Brother, you said that the corpses had been around here back then?”

A slightly younger voice answered, “Yes. Back then, all of the villagers had seen that white figure here.”

Cheng Qian's brows knitted and he immediately hid himself, watching those two come to the entrance of the cave. He had seen Liulang a few times, and had the impression that he was a young man who couldn't keep his feelings off his face. But at the moment, Liulang's face was extremely emotionless as he led Nian Dada into the cave. Looking carefully, his gaze felt somewhat dim, and there seemed to be a layer of mist over his pupils. As they approached the cave's entrance, the mist also thickened.

When he saw that Nian Dada, the absolute fool, hadn't noticed anything off and carelessly followed Liulang into the cave, Cheng Qian stopped hesitating. He immediately reined his entire presence and followed them in. His body was formed with the Spirit-Condensing Jade, so he was very skilled in hiding his own living aura. It was much easier than with an ordinary body made of flesh, and he could pretend to be dead any time he wanted.

As he walked, Nian Dada said, "You don't need to tell me. This cave really seems like it has had people die in here before, there's some kind of foul smell."

When Cheng Qian heard this from a moderate distance away, a sense of helplessness appeared in his heart — this ability of discernment is truly unmatched.

Liulang didn't reply, eyes gazing straight ahead. There wasn't the slightest change in the youth's footsteps, tapping rhythmically against the ground.

Nian Dada, "Young Brother?"

When he still got no reply, Nian Dada finally felt goosebumps on his skin and couldn't help exclaiming, as if to boost his own courage, "Shishu! Cheng Shishu, are you inside? Cheng..."

His words were cut off abruptly, as if his tongue had been plucked out, and he stood stupefied — as they reached the end of the narrow path in front of them, Liulang, who was leading the way, suddenly collapsed without a sound. The scene inside the cave was revealed in full.

There was some kind of object inside. It was about as tall as a person, shaped like an oil lamp, open-mouthed with a long neck. Under the lamp's long neck, there were fine, densely packed carvings of charms, which extended down past the ground. The blood-red charms filled up the area within a few *zhang* of it.

The charms weren't particularly frightening. Even if they were, Nian Dada's foolish eyes wouldn't have been able to figure out what was wrong with the charms. What had frightened him was the fact that the liquid inside the lamp wasn't oil, but pooled up blood, which was moving all by itself, as if stirred by something. Countless skeletal remains bobbed up and down within. The entire mountain cave was shrouded in the color of blood.

Cheng Qian, who had followed them in stealthily, furrowed his brows. He could tell with one look that this was a Soul-Consuming Lamp.

Furthermore, it seemed to be the same one that Lord Beiming had destroyed back then.

Right as he was carefully studying the charms on the ground, a white figure suddenly broke out from the lamp and sunk into Liulang's body without warning.

The youth curled into a bizarre posture on the ground and abruptly leapt up. His nails suddenly grew three *cun* in an instant as he mercilessly squeezed Nian Dada's neck. Nian Dada was a cultivator and he already had his sword in his hand, he should have been able to block that attack. But when he saw Liulang's young face, his soft-hearted tendency appeared. He thought, *This*

kid is an ordinary person, if I strike him with my sword, he might not be able to survive.

With just that slight hesitation, Nian Dada had missed his last chance. The demonic energy had completely invaded Liulang's body. Bit by bit, the originally smooth skin on the youth's face flaked off. The bones in his arms contorted like snakes, their length uneven due to the violent force of the demonic energy. His deformed finger bones protruded through his skin, moving up and pointing at the spot between Nian Dada's eyebrows. A hoarse voice murmured, "Gathering the darkness of the netherworld, blending the blood and Qi of thousands as body, tempering tens of thousands of souls, that is the supreme pinnacle of demonic arts..."

Nian Dada's head hurt so much it seemed about to split. His soul was heavily shaken, it felt like his physical body couldn't keep it contained, as if his soul was about to escape through the spot between his brows right then and there.

A malicious smile appeared on 'Liulang's face, "The Soul Lamp once again... Who!"

A snow-white sword aura burst forth, mercilessly striking down at 'Liulang's head. Liulang's Soul-Extraction was cut off, and he almost suffered backlash from the Soul-Consuming Lamp. He had no choice but to toss Nian Dada aside and produced a roar of extreme fury.

Cheng Qian came forward with his sword, head still lowered to study the charms under the lamp. He spoke in an unhurried tone, "What's this, Senior Jiang, Lord Beiming had destroyed the Soul-Consuming Lamp with his own soul back then, but your body and soul hadn't been obliterated? Seems like the path of Ghostism really has some unique effects on the soul. You're... Hmm, could it be, you're trying to rebuild the Soul-Consuming Lamp?"

When Cheng Qian first saw the gigantic Soul-Consuming Lamp, he had first thought of Jiang Peng. Then he heard that voice and immediately became more convinced of the similarity, but he couldn't be certain.

The charms on the ground were shockingly complicated, that even Cheng Qian couldn't immediately figure them out. Because of this, he'd purposefully dragged his words out, putting up the farce that he had a completely thought-out plan, and made things up without base. He wanted to stall for time by talking, so he could memorize the charms on the ground by rote.

Who would've thought that the moment he said those words, 'Liulang''s expression changed drastically. He threw himself at Cheng Qian with a furious roar, as if his secret had been revealed so he had to silence the witness.

While Cheng Qian turned his body to avoid a few strikes of dark energy, he was internally surprised — this person was really Jiang Peng? He was really molding another Soul-Consuming Lamp?

Even if Jiang Peng used to be a peerless demon lord, he was currently possessing the body of an average person and had no Soul-Consuming Lamp or ghostly spirits at his side. With Cheng Qian's current level of cultivation, he wouldn't care much about Jiang Peng. Especially since he had clearly lost his senses and was practically a rabid dog.

Thinking back to the great demon lord on the East Sea all those years ago, who had completely reduced the cultivator sects' dignity and prestige to dust, the difference with his current state was like the distance between the heavens and the earth. Then, the idea of pretending to be an evil spirit causing trouble to fool nearby cultivators... Did he really come up with it himself?

Cheng Qian suddenly felt his hair stand on end — just what kind of path was Ghostism?

Was it the people using the Soul-Consuming Lamp as their tool, or was it the Soul-Consuming Lamp turning the people into ghosts?

Back then, exactly who had led Jiang Peng onto the path of Ghostism?

Cheng Qian immediately stopped suppressing his own cultivation. With him as the source, cold frost gradually covered the entire mountain cave, but they couldn't come close to the surroundings of the Soul-Consuming Lamp.

Jiang Peng was chilled by the coldness and somehow regained shreds of his reason. He retreated half a step and stared at Cheng Qian in alarm, "Who are you?"

Cheng Qian answered coldly, "Someone cleaning up the sect's filth."

After he finished speaking, the glare of his sword came at Jiang Peng like the stars on a cold night. He was using Fuyao Wooden Swordplay. Surprise flashed on Jiang Peng's face. Then his hand cut into Liulang's torso, forcefully ripping out a rib bone, which turned into a long sword shrouded with dark energy in his hand. When raised into the air, it immediately produced ten incomplete ghost spirits, threateningly surrounding Cheng Qian despite their lack of real power.

Nian Dada, who had just managed to catch his breath, almost fainted upon seeing this. Straining his strangled throat, he shouted, "Look out!"

After a hundred years of cultivating, Cheng Qian never thought that the first person to exchange blows with him would be his martial uncle from the same sect.

What kind of fate was this?

The unremarkable, mediocre sword in Cheng Qian's hand suddenly expanded three *chi*. There was no blocking the sharp blade and it cut through those ghost spirits like nothing, bearing down on Jiang Peng with great force.

The pressure that Jiang Peng felt from his own sect's sword technique was indescribable. For a brief instance, this great demon's morale finally wavered. As soon as this happened, an opening immediately appeared on the flawless circle of charms around the Soul-Consuming Lamp. Chilling frost cut into the blood-red charms — Cheng Qian was only making a feint earlier, his true aim was the Soul-Consuming Lamp.

He exclaimed in a low voice, “Break —”

In that instance, the entire cave quaked heavily, as if about to collapse. The half-completed Soul-Consuming Lamp was cleaved in two with one strike from Cheng Qian. Thousands of ghostly spirits fought to escape the Soul-Consuming Lamp's confinement, coiling into dark mist. With a flick of Cheng Qian's sword, the thick bloody aura churned for a moment and blew up with a deafening sound.

The loud bang almost caused Nian Dada to faint. He only came back to himself after a while, and saw that a corner of the cave had been blasted open, with light pouring in from outside. Fortunately, the mountain could still withstand the force and didn't bury them alive. Once again, the Soul-Consuming Lamp was destroyed. The Elder of the Ethereal Lake had returned his sword to its sheath, coolly standing on one side to look at the bloody ‘Liulang’.

Nian Dada scrambled to Cheng Qian's side, “Shishu... this...”

“The real host has escaped.” As Cheng Qian spoke, he reached out toward Nian Dada, “Do you have any medicine for treating wounds?”

“Yes, yes!” Nian Dada hurriedly felt around his own body, procuring a small bottle of medicine. When he was about to clumsily feed it to the dying Liulang, Cheng Qian reached out to stop him. As soon as the pill fell into Cheng Qian’s hand, it dissolved into a puff of mist, gently flowing into Liulang’s body.

The medicine of Shuzhong was outstanding and could produce instant results. Liulang’s dazed eyes had already regained focus. The youth’s face was full of holes, his uneven arms lying limply at his sides. A rib was missing from his torso, leaving a dark, bloody hole. It was a ghastly sight.

Nian Dada couldn’t help asking, “Shishu, can he survive?”

Cheng Qian lowered his eyes, looking at the youth on the verge of death. Liulang’s deformed hands dug into the ground forcefully, eyes opened wide with an almost violent will to seek survival.

Cheng Qian said, “That depends on whether he wants to live.”

Before Nian Dada could figure out what those words meant, he saw Cheng Qian produce three bolts of cold energy, which, like three nails, mercilessly pierced Liulang’s skullcap, dantian, and the sole of his feet. Liulang opened his mouth, but he couldn’t produce a single sound. His entire body convulsed violently on the ground, leaving a long trail of bloodstains.

“For an ordinary person, their soul would disperse with their body’s death, so I’ve pinned his soul into this body. If he can hold it for four hours, take him to Mingming Valley and ask your father to send him to Tang Zhen Zhenren’s place,” Cheng Qian said, “If he can’t hold it, there’s nothing I can

do — I have something else to deal with, I can't take you with me. If fate allows, we'll meet again."

After he finished speaking, he turned around and disappeared in a puff of azure smoke — he had departed in a hurry just like that.

Nian Dada, "Ah! Shishu! Wait!"

He leapt three *chi* into the air, wanting to run after Cheng Qian, but he couldn't bring himself to leave the unconscious Liulang, so he could only spin around in place. Suddenly, a ball of fire burst into the mountain cave like a shooting star, transforming into a person when it landed. Nian Dada recoiled in fright, but when he looked closer, he saw that the newcomer was a beautiful girl, so he greeted her with a slight blush, "M-Miss, you..."

The person who had burst in was none other than Shuikeng. She looked around and stomped her foot, "Where is he?"

Nian Dada stuttered, "W-who?"

Shuikeng came forward to grab Nian Dada's collar, lifted him into the air, and fired off rapidly, "Where's the person who had used a sword here just now?"

Nian Dada's face flushed bright red as he squeezed out with great difficulty, "... He left."

"Where to?"

With a bitter face, Nian Dada struggled to save his own neck, "I don't know, Miss. That's a senior from our humble sect, why would he tell me where he's going?"

Shuikeng dropped him and turned to leave. But she thought for a bit and turned back around, questioning closely, “What sect are you from? What kind of senior is he?”

After coughing drily for a moment, Nian Dada still replied cordially, “There’s only our Mingming Valley in this area. That’s the Elder of the Ethereal Lake from our sect, he’s been cultivating in seclusion for almost fifty years and only got out recently, this is his first time leaving the valley. Miss, you must’ve gotten the wrong person...”

Shuikeng cut him off, “What’s his name?”

Nian Dada sighed at her persistence, but he still answered honestly, “Cheng...”

Before he could say the following word, Shuikeng had turned into a ball of fire again and flew out in pursuit without turning back.

Fifty years of seclusion, first time leaving the valley. If that really was her little Shixiong, where would he go? Other than Fuyao Mountain, Shuikeng couldn’t think of any other place.

She was crying as she went. To be honest, she didn’t know what there was to cry about, but she couldn’t stop her tears for some reason. As soon as the tears fell from her face, they immediately evaporated amid the flames around her.

Shuikeng wished she could announce the news to everything under the heavens, or send a message for Da-shixiong, Er-shixiong, and Zheshi-dage. But she also didn’t dare to, fearing that this was a mere dream, a flower in the mirror, the moon reflected on the water.

She didn’t even dare to hear the idiot say that person’s full name.

In the past hundred years, San-shixiong had become their Sect Leader's nilin [1]. Nobody was allowed to mention him. Even the slightest hint of allusion could incur his wrath.

But while forbidding others from mentioning him, he himself had carved a phantom ring in the shape of a copper coin, which he'd sometimes summon to torment himself. Not to mention repeatedly painting that person's portrait, again and again. Every time he finished the painting, he would stare at it in a daze, then destroy it with his own hands.

Shuikeng knew the reason for this. He didn't want the person in the portrait to eternally remain in his youth, but he was powerless to change this.

Can a person come back to life after dying? She thought to herself, Impossible. Even for a cultivator of the primordial spirit level, when they're reincarnated, they wouldn't be the same as they were previously. Moreover, San-shixiong wasn't even seventeen years old back then, he was far from reaching the level of primordial spirit.

Shuikeng had almost convinced herself, but her wings refused to obey her, and continued flying toward Fuyao Mountain single-mindedly.

She was completely right, Cheng Qian was going to Fuyao Mountain. After seeing Jiang Peng again, he was reminded of the complicated old entanglements of the previous generation. He had a faint feeling in his heart, that when those issues had been sorted out, he would find the key to revitalizing their sect.

Why couldn't Fuyao Mountain become a second Mingming Valley?

On his way, Cheng Qian had made various mental preparations, considering the worst possibilities. Could Fuyao Mountain have already turned into a barren hill? That Library of theirs, with the most exquisite arrays and

countless solitary copies of charms, could they have been claimed by some other person?

But it never occurred to him that none of these had happened — he couldn't find the way back to Fuyao Mountain.

Back then, when Muchun Zhenren brought Cheng Qian back to the sect, he had led him up step by step. Cheng Qian didn't think that he could possibly fail to find Fuyao Mountain. But after an unrelenting journey of a day and a night on his sword, following his memories to search high and low, he finally had no choice but to admit: Fuyao Mountain... had disappeared into thin air.

[1] '*nilin*' The word used here is . It refers to the scale that grows in the opposite direction on a dragon's body, usually under its throat. It is said that a dragon will enter a fit of rage if its nilin is touched.

While Cheng Qian was searching for Fuyao Mountain like a headless fly, Shuikeng had arrived nearby. In utter confusion, she looked over the green mountains and plains. As she wondered where to start her search, she suddenly felt something squirm around in her sleeve, causing her wrist to itch.

Shuikeng looked down and saw a leaf that had slipped into her sleeve at some point. Under her scrutiny, the leaf transformed into a caterpillar.

The girl side of Shuikeng felt goosebumps crawling all over her skin, but the bird side of her wanted to chomp on the caterpillar. She was torn on what to do, but then the caterpillar raised its upper body cheerfully and spoke with Li Yun's voice, "Where have you run off to?"

... Er-shixiong had really become more and more deranged.

Shuikeng had been crying and hurrying all along the way, so her mind was quite muddled. Without much thought, she blurted out, "I'm near Fuyao Mountain."

Immediately after she spoke, she almost bit her own tongue off — bah, why did she just tell the truth, how was she going to explain this?

As expected, after the caterpillar heard those words, its disposition changed drastically. Its soft body actually 'stood' up. Even though its form was wonky and crooked, it had quite an imposing air.

The speaker had switched to her Da-shixiong. Yan Zhengming asked, “Why did you go back to Fuyao Mountain? The mountain is still sealed.”

This was a long story. In the past hundred years, they had also tried to sneak back a few times. But other than seeing some suspicious people of questionable background in the nearby towns, they couldn’t find Fuyao Mountain, which should have been right here, no matter what they did.

Only after Yan Zhengming had first cultivated his primordial spirit did he learn that only a primordial spirit could enter the Sect Leader’s Seal, and the Sect Leader’s Seal was actually a key.

Turned out, it wasn’t a coincidence that the caves in Fuyao Mountain were connected to the Valley of Yao [1]. The entire mountain was a natural secret realm. If the current sect leader had brought the Sect Leader’s Seal away and sealed the mountain, nobody would be able to enter or leave as they pleased. No wonder their declining sect could remain peaceful in the midst of the raging times despite not having any guards.

When she heard those words, Shuikeng became tongue-tied. After faltering for a while, she stuttered, “I... I uh... I just got homesick suddenly, so I came back for a look.”

Unfortunately, their sect leader wasn’t so easy to deceive. Yan Zhengming said, “Homesick? Stop lying, you were still gnawing on your diaper in my carriage when you left Fuyao Mountain, what exactly would you miss? Tell me the truth.”

Shuikeng, “...”

She had never been good at lying, because there was never any need to — her martial brothers were all quite older than her and usually pampered her lots. Other than requiring her to finish her assignments every day, if she

wanted anything, the others would always do everything they could to fulfill her wish. Even if she made mistakes occasionally, she wouldn't suffer any excessive punishments.

But she had only come all the way here clinging to a stubborn shred of hope. If she were to tell the truth, other than causing her Shixiong to also refuse to accept reality and become disappointed again, what good would there be?

Shuikeng clenched her teeth and decided to make something up on the spot. She racked her brains, causing cold sweat to break out on her back, and finally squeezed out stutteringly, "I... While I was waiting for you earlier, I flew into the sky and saw some bloody aura around a village in the distance. I thought it might be the demon we're looking for this time, so I went in pursuit — Er-shixiong was next to me, but I was in a hurry then so I didn't get to explain to him — uh, and then I arrived near Fuyao Mountain in my chase. Da-shixiong, do you think that this time, it really is... Si-shixiong?"

As she spun her lie, her heart wouldn't stop racing, so she felt a bit breathless.

The caterpillar stayed silent for a long while. And then Yan Zhengming spoke in an unhurried voice, "Your Er-shixiong said it was too far away, he didn't sense any bloody aura."

It was already tragic enough that she couldn't give a perfect lie, but there was someone to ruin her story too!

At last, Shuikeng became fed up and said, "Fine, I'll tell you the truth, you're so annoying! I saw a really handsome fellow through Er-shixiong's golden cicada, I followed him here."

Yan Zhengming, "Huh?"

Shuikeng was struck with sudden inspiration and added, “Really, he’s much more handsome than you!”

These words had struck her sect leader where it hurt the most. As expected, Yan Zhengming refused to speak to her again. The caterpillar sprawled back down. Li Yun hurriedly told her, “Stop messing around, hurry and come back.”

Then the caterpillar seemed to have exhausted its energy, turning back into a leaf. It curled up and fell from her body.

Shuikeng had finally muddled her way through and sighed in great relief. She spun in place and turned into a palm-sized little bird, flew into the trees, and started focusing on her search.

At the same time in Shuzhong, Yan Zhengming was telling Li Yun, “When we came here, I’d seen some bloody aura around this place, but now it’s gone. It’s probably been taken care of by someone from Mingming Valley. Shuikeng is a shameless brat, I refuse to believe she would become more mature because she’d taken a liking to some fellow. She was stuttering so much, something must be up. We’d better go there to prevent her causing trouble.”

Li Yun had almost been convinced by his completely logical words, but then he heard Yan Zhengming grumble, “‘Much more handsome than me’, she said. How outrageous. Truly, a dog wouldn’t know the value of gold-rimmed jade — hmph, I’d like to see for myself.”

Li Yun sighed heavily. It felt like his Shimei’s little petty trick had brought her more harm than good. A single sentence from her had successfully provoked Da-shixiong.

As for Cheng Qian — because he couldn't find Fuyao Mountain, he had no choice but to hide his sword, rein in the frost-like aura around his body, and slip into the nearby town pretending to be an ordinary person.

These past years, the world of the mortals really seemed to have steadily deteriorated. Cheng Qian still remembered that when Shifu first brought them down the mountain to go to the East Sea, the villages and towns they'd passed along the way had been much more crowded than now.

He randomly picked a tavern to enter and ordered a pot of tea. But he left the pot of steaming tea aside and called out to the server instead, "Young fellow, let me ask you about a place."

The server saw that Cheng Qian had the form of someone with bright prospects and was dressed quite well, so of course he was willing to toady up to him. He came forward and spoke obsequiously, "Young Master, feel free to ask."

Cheng Qian said, "I heard that there is a celestial mountain less than thirty *li* from here, so I'd gone out of my way to see it for myself. But I couldn't find it no matter what, so I wanted to ask you locals for directions."

When the server heard this, his expression turned more solemn. He looked Cheng Qian over and asked carefully, "What, could you be another one of those immortal cultivators?"

"Immortal is too high a praise," Cheng Qian smiled, "I've practiced some cultivation methods by myself, but I haven't even been admitted to any sect. I wouldn't dare to call myself a cultivator — judging from your words, have there been many people trying to find that mountain?"

The server threw his rag onto his own shoulder and laughed, “Of course. Some other guests had asked me two days ago. To tell you the truth, this lowly one is a local who was born and raised here. I’ve heard about the legend of the celestial mountain from my grandfather’s generation, but nobody has ever seen it. Would us commoners’ eyes be able to see those immortals’ dwelling?”

Cheng Qian said, “So you’re saying that a lot of immortals had come and gone, but they also couldn’t find it?”

The server said with a smile, “If not, why would it be called a legend? But the scenery there is quite nice, if the Young Master is willing, going there for a stroll is good too.”

The server was about to leave, but Cheng Qian hurriedly called out, “Wait, young fellow, you said someone else had also tried to look two days ago, where did they go? If I hurry to catch up, I might be able to group up with them.”

The server replied, “I saw that they’d gone toward the public road — but Young Master, those people don’t look friendly, they don’t seem the type to be messed with. It would be better for the Young Master to not get involved with them.”

Cheng Qian’s heart stirred hearing those words. A large group of people... making advances on Fuyao Mountain, what did they want?

Without waiting for his tea to cool, Cheng Qian left. He had only ever taken the public road once, and it had been back when they’d gone down the mountain.

Since his Da-shixiong’s troop of large carriages, which had looked like a marriage procession, couldn’t possibly go through the small path, they had

to make a big show of traveling through the public road. Back then, let's not mention flying on a sword, he couldn't even ride a horse too well. He also kept dividing his attention to continue practicing, that Shifu had to keep looking after him along the way...

Cheng Qian's entire person turned into cold frost, silently passing through the public road. In this place, each blade of grass, every single tree contained a fragment of his memories.

He had gone about twenty *li* when he suddenly stopped without any space to spare. He just barely managed to withdraw his foot, which had almost stepped forward — in the narrow lane, two rocks stood opposite of each other. The arrangement was very deliberate, as if someone had done it intentionally. There were barely noticeable charms carved on them.

The two opposing charms had formed a snare, cutting down the middle of the main road — if anyone were to pass by, they would definitely alert the person who had set up the charms.

Cheng Qian's brows knitted. He focused his energy to his eyes, gazed forward, and saw that there was an inescapable net cast all over the place, layers upon layers of charms laid neatly — the rocks on the roadside, the ground, even the unevenly-sized wooden tablets in the shade of the green trees, all of them were traps.

As he swept his eyes over the place, an indescribable fire rose in his heart abruptly — who was the person sneaking about the foot of Fuyao Mountain?

But despite his seething heart, Cheng Qian still didn't recklessly unleash his consciousness. With every two steps forward, he took one step back to avoid the charms. As he proceeded, he became more and more alarmed. Even without unleashing his consciousness, he could faintly sense that the

person who had carved these charms definitely didn't have a weak cultivation. Where the charms met, there was some bloody aura leaking out too, so it was clear that they didn't practice a proper method of cultivation.

To be honest, the regular cultivators weren't forbidden from taking lives. But they didn't usually do it for the sake of killing, and wouldn't harbor any murderous intent. So, no matter how many people's lives they had taken, no trace of bloody aura would be left on them. But demonic cultivators were different. When Cheng Qian first entered the sect, he had ignorantly gone to examine the three thousand paths of demonic cultivation, and had believed that there wasn't much difference between those and the correct path. He'd even gone to ask Shifu about this. But now he understood that even though they seemed similar at a glance, they were as different as the heavens and the earth in reality.

Cultivating in the correct path is achieved by communicating with the heavens and the earth, and striving to receive and expel the clear Qi of the heavens and the earth to form the cultivator's core. But the essence of demonic cultivation was engulfing, it only received without expelling anything. This way, there was no differentiating between the pure and the corrupted. Though their progress was rapid, malicious energy would build up with time. Even if they had never had blood on their hands, the charms they carved would naturally carry a bloody aura.

For someone who cultivated the demonic path, the moment they violated their precept and stained their hands with blood, everything would get out of hand, and nobody would be able to bring them back — because of this, since ancient times, it was extremely rare for demonic cultivators to achieve the Dao.

Those who tread this path must have the resolution to stake everything in this single venture, and the ambition to not regret anything even in death.

Even for Cheng Qian, passing through this net of charms took a great deal of effort, but he didn't see the 'group of people' that the server had mentioned. As Cheng Qian carefully made his way around the traps to enter the array, he saw a clearing in front of him. A man with a large build had his back turned to Cheng Qian.

That man had cockily extended a circle of his consciousness around him. There was a strangely brazen air about that person, as if wordlessly declaring himself the sole overlord of the plains, which stifled the air around him with a bloody aura. Cheng Qian couldn't immediately figure out the depth of that person's cultivation, so he hid behind a tree and reined in his entire living aura. In an instant, he became no different from a dead object.

The man whose back was turned to him seemed to be setting up an array. Halfway through, he suddenly started acting strange.

That person suddenly tensed up, as if facing his nemesis. After murmuring to himself for a while, he suddenly lost his temper toward the empty air, blowing up the ground with explosive sounds. He seemed to have gone mad, roaring loudly, "You dare!"

After roaring those words, the man tensed again, like a puppet whose strings had been pulled. Soon afterward, he abruptly stopped struggling. Dark, sinister laughter came out of him as he answered himself, "Why wouldn't I dare, you good-for-nothing."

Cheng Qian's eyebrows knitted — Nian Dada would talk to himself too, but it had only felt comical. When done by this demonic cultivator, it really sent chills down one's spine.

The next moment, that man roared in fury and started attacking himself — he struck his own chest with his hand, the roaring sound of wind and

thunder in his palm. He wasn't holding back at all. But then dark energy burst forth from his chest, clashing against his own hand. It wasn't clear whether his hand had wounded his chest, or if the dark energy on his chest had wounded his attacking hand. In any case, he'd lost, twice.

After staggering for a moment, the man coughed up a mouthful of blood.

Cheng Qian thought to himself, *What kind of insanity is this?*

Right then, a startled exclamation came from not too far away. The charms set around the perimeter had been triggered, causing fireworks to burst on the spot. In an instant, countless bloody bones clawed out of the ground, turning into dense chains, which roughly wrapped around that person. That person was dragged through the distance and mercilessly thrown onto the ground.

This unfortunate soul was none other than Shuikeng.

She had never expected Cheng Qian to mingle with the common folk, and had been looking around the forest in her bird form for heavens knew how long. The longer she searched, the more disappointed she became. She had been truly exhausted both physically and mentally, so she hadn't been careful enough and fell into the demon's trap.

The moment she was caught, she immediately turned into her human form to try fighting back, but then she realized that her cultivation had been completely suppressed by the demonic energy.

Shuikeng was manhandled violently and almost cussed out loud, but in the end, she restrained herself to avoid angering the other person. She knew that her Shixiong must have left something on her person to protect her, so she made no sound and curled up on the ground playing dead, focusing on fighting the demonic energy that had entered her body.

Shuikeng was right. The instant those chains grabbed onto her, a hair tie on the back of her head broke. In the hair tie was a Puppet Charm left by Yan Zhengming. It was because of this Puppet Charm that she hadn't been riddled with holes by those chains.

The Puppet Charm of a cultivator who had cultivated a primordial spirit was nothing like the one that Cheng Qian had given to Xueqing back then. Yan Zhengming and Li Yun had arrived nearby, and as soon as the Puppet Charm broke, Yan Zhengming immediately locked onto Shuikeng's location and hurried there with Li Yun.

But Cheng Qian, who was hiding on the side, couldn't recognize Shuikeng anymore. Girls would transform greatly as they grew up. When a toddler had turned into a grown-up maiden, sometimes she would become almost unrecognizable compared to her original form. Moreover, Shuikeng had retracted her wings at the moment.

Cheng Qian had no idea who she was, so he didn't show himself and remained watching on the sidelines.

Right then, Shuikeng suddenly felt the chains loosen around her. She heard the demon lord exclaim in panic, "Miss, hurry and run!"

Shuikeng was stunned. Before she could feel any relief, the chains had tightened again. The demon lord's tone changed as he spoke darkly, "It's just a century-old little *yao*... Bastard!"

The demon lord's left hand abruptly reached out, fingers curling into a claw-like shape, about to lock down on the chains. But his right hand gripped his left wrist tightly, as if stopping himself from doing so. The first voice roared again, "Stop playing dead! Hurry and run, I can't hold on for too long!"

This was the first time Shuikeng ever met such a bizarre demonic cultivator. In the end, she couldn't help looking up, risking her own life to earn some new knowledge.

The moment she looked, she had even forgotten to run.

She called out, stunned, "Si-shixiong?"

The demon lord's eyes were bright red, face malicious. His features had been twisted almost beyond recognition, but she could tell with one look that this person was none other than Han Yuan — Han Yuan, whom they couldn't find no matter how they searched!

After she called out to him, Han Yuan also seemed stunned. His face softened slightly as his gaze fell on Shuikeng's face, as if in disbelief, or bewilderment, but also as if in avoidance. After a long while, his lips finally moved as he spoke softly, "You, are you... Little Shi... Ah!"

Before he could finish his words, the demonic aura on him burst explosively. His entire person seemed to have become dark mist.

The cold voice spoke again, "So you're Han Tan, this is truly convenient!"

As soon as the words 'Han Tan' were spoken, Cheng Qian's pupils shrunk and he stopped caring about everything else — before he even came into view, the frost-like figure of his sword had already moved out to cut the chains on Shuikeng's body. At the same time, a long whistling sound rang as the entire ground quaked heavily. The charms that Han Yuan had set up outside was broken with a powerful sword aura.

And then a person's figure swept in front of them like the wind. The sword aura came toward Han Yuan, its pressure bearing down on him like a mountain.

Shuikeng screamed, “Don’t! Si-shixiong...”

In the midst of the flying sparks and hurtling rocks, Cheng Qian could no longer consider the rules of the sect. He instinctively protected Han Yuan in the confusion, and reached up to receive the attack.

‘Decline from Prosperity, Full Moon’ clashed with ‘the Roc’s Long Flight, Rise into the Clear Sky’.

The newcomer’s sword had a chink in its blade. It happened to lock these two strikes, which came from the same source.

In that instant, everyone was stunned.

[1] ‘*Valley of Yao*’ The word used here is . The previous translators seemed to have translated this as ‘Demon Valley’, but since ‘demon ()’ and ‘yao ()’ are completely different things, I decided to use ‘Valley of Yao’ instead.

With a clattering sound, Yan Zhengming's sword fell from his hand and dropped onto the ground. He was one of the most outstanding sword cultivators of his generation, but he didn't even notice his sword hitting his own foot.

At the moment, the sky was taking on the colors of dusk. The person in front of him was like the manifestation of his xinmo [1], his form no different from the thousands of portraits that had filled the ground on cold nights. It felt like his entire soul had been dispersed in that instant. With a single glance, Yan Zhengming had completely forgotten everything that was happening around him.

Perhaps some people would still hold onto some kind of wishful thinking despite fully understanding their loss, imagining something like 'In the afterlife, there must be a chance for reunion'. But Yan Zhengming wouldn't. When he buried Cheng Qian with his own hands all those years ago, he had severed his last shred of hope.

He had always believed that he was already weak enough, he really didn't need to be any weaker than this.

Yan Zhengming couldn't quite tell if this was real, or if this was a dream. He could only feel like he had gone back to the past to redo things. As he looked at that face, which he had etched onto his heart, and Han Yuan not too far away, with a dark aura hovering around him... It felt as if he had returned to the uninhabited island on the East Sea, to the most horrible day of his life that he never wanted to look back on again.

Yan Zhengming abruptly reached up to grab Cheng Qian's shoulder, disregarding the sharp sword in his hand, and shoved him behind his own body. As if he had rehearsed this countless times in his dreams, putting all of his eternal regrets into this action.

Cheng Qian obviously never expected that the person to clash with him would be his own sect leader. Before he could even feel the anticipation and fear of returning home, he had run straight into this predicament completely unprepared. Dumbstruck, he fumbled to withdraw that glittering travel expense sword so he wouldn't mistakenly wound anyone on their first encounter. Yan Zhengming's shove caused him to stagger for a moment before regaining his balance.

Fuyao Mountain was hidden in the secret realm. The disciples, almost within reach, were either perplexed, struggling, or crying.

After a hundred years, the sect allies had finally reunited. But nobody ever expected it to be like this.

Yan Zhengming's entire person was toeing the thin line between insanity and calmness. Decisively, he cast aside his chaotic thoughts to deal with later. Without a glance to Cheng Qian, he told Han Yuan, who felt both familiar and foreign, "Now that you've come, stay."

After that, he didn't even look at the cracked sword on the ground. His energy struck toward Han Yuan, forming countless sharp blades in the air, which seemed to blot out the sky and cover the earth.

That demonic cultivator seemed to have completely taken control of Han Yuan's body. He opened his mouth to spit out a cloud of black mist, which turned into a vulture with a ghostly face. The vulture gave a sharp cry as it spread its wings, seamlessly enveloping Han Yuan within.

Seeing the blades closing in, that person must have figured out that he wouldn't be able to gain anything today. He then used some kind of unknown technique and disappeared in a puff of mist.

When they looked again, only a white paper cutout of a man was left, its center pierced through.

Han Yuan... That demonic cultivator saw that he was at a disadvantage and fled.

Yan Zhengming stood in place for a moment, stunned. He couldn't seem to muster the courage to look back. After a long while, he finally took a few deep breaths. He turned around stiffly, as if his entire body had corroded, and looked at Cheng Qian without blinking.

Throughout Cheng Qian's entire life, no matter in life or death, he had never shied away in the face of trouble. But at that moment, reuniting after such a long time apart, Da-shixiong's gaze suddenly gave him the urge to flee in defeat.

Li Yun's gaze wandered here and there, as if he was dreaming. After a while, he finally mumbled, "Xiao... Xiao-Qian? What, what's happening here?"

Shuikeng held back her tears as she rambled incoherently, "San-shixiong, I'd seen your sword in Shuzhong, but when I went after you, you had already left, I... I thought, if it really was you, you would definitely come back... But I didn't know if I was mistaken, so I didn't dare tell Shixiong..."

She quickly lowered her head. There were chains still clinging to her arms, which rattled about as she wiped her tears. After choking on her sobs for a

long time, she finally asked, like a little girl who had been wrongfully treated, “You... Why didn’t you wait for me...”

Cheng Qian’s heart, which had remained immovable in the past decades within the icy lake, seized tightly. For a moment, he couldn’t find the words to respond.

Yan Zhengming slowly raised a hand to cradle Cheng Qian’s face. It felt cold to the touch, as if his body temperature was a bit lower than the ordinary person. Shuangren, which he had always carried with him, seemed to be aware of Cheng Qian too. It restlessly started buzzing, trembling minutely. Yan Zhengming’s heart was in great turmoil, as if entire mountains had been shaken within him. He wanted to ask where Cheng Qian had gone all these years, he wanted to ask whether the wound on his chest was still there. He wanted to ask how his days had been, whether he had ever suffered any hardships... Thousands of words and questions caused his mind to go blank.

But he couldn’t even begin to speak, because compared to his current state of mind, it felt like anything he said would just be clumsy and careless.

At last, all of those thoughts twisted into one, turning into a lowly, almost desperate plea. Yan Zhengming thought, *Could this be real?*

Cheng Qian lowered his eyes slightly, avoiding Yan Zhengming’s gaze, and called out in a low voice, “Shixiong.”

“Nn,” Yan Zhengming answered vaguely, “You still...”

His voice was barely audible. With just two words, he was already struggling to continue. The following words seemed to be stuck in his throat, and he could only mouth, “... You still remember me.”

Cheng Qian pressed down on his hand lightly. All of a sudden, breathing became a difficult task.

The rims of Yan Zhengming's eyes were slowly reddening. "Why didn't you come to find us all these years?"

Cheng Qian stayed silent.

Yan Zhengming suddenly withdrew his hand from Cheng Qian's grip and punched his lower abdomen without holding back at all. Cheng Qian made no move to dodge, receiving the strike head-on. He grunted in pain as the taste of iron rose in his chest. Before he could swallow it back down, a second punch had come. With the mouthful of blood stuck in his throat, Cheng Qian immediately fell on his knees, coughing repeatedly.

Li Yun finally snapped out of his stupefied state and threw himself forward, grabbing Yan Zhengming's waist and fighting to drag him back. "What are you doing?"

Yan Zhengming was attacking indiscriminately, so Li Yun also took an elbow. "Let go!"

Li Yun roared in his ear, "Have you gone insane!"

Yan Zhengming's hoarse voice sounded like rusted blades clashing together as he yelled, "I've been fucking insane for almost a hundred years!"

Cheng Qian's ears were ringing, but he couldn't find it in himself to be angry.

He had spent more than fifty years in seclusion within the icy lake, and Tang Zhen had removed his memories. While his martial brothers spent

their days drifting from place to place without a home, it felt like he was shirking his responsibilities and lazing around with his heart free of worries. When Cheng Qian thought of this, any anger he might have felt immediately cooled, sinking into his stomach, turning into ashes of remorse.

He felt both remorseful and wronged by his Shixiong's actions, but he couldn't act on either of those feelings. It felt like they were threatening to overflow along with the blood between his fingertips.

Cheng Qian suddenly felt that in this lifetime, he might never hold such deep care and concern for anyone else.

Shuikeng exclaimed loudly, "Are you done yet!"

She abruptly spread her wings to get rid of the chains on her body and ran to Cheng Qian's side, carefully helping him up, "San-shixiong..."

Even the little brat that everyone had treated as a mascot back then had grown so big. Other than those wings, which remained very familiar, her entire person had transformed greatly into a young lady, so she felt a little foreign.

As she approached, Cheng Qian suddenly felt a bit awkward and hurriedly backed off a little, waving his hand. He couldn't speak for some time, but his gaze was somewhat bashful, and there was a slight nostalgic smile on his lips.

After fighting Li Yun and wearing himself out, Yan Zhengming finally calmed down. He looked at Cheng Qian blankly for a while, closed his eyes, and sighed deeply before walking toward him. With only those few steps, all of his discontent and indignation from his sufferings, which he had never been able to confide in anyone, disappeared just like that.

It felt like he was finally waking up from years upon years of nightmares.

Yan Zhengming pulled aside the hand that Cheng Qian was using to cover his mouth and carefully wiped the bloodstain at the corner of his lips. “Does it hurt?”

Cheng Qian hesitated for a moment and nodded.

“That’s right if it hurts.” Yan Zhengming bent over to hug him, resting his chin on the hollow of Cheng Qian’s shoulder. He murmured in a low voice, “If you dare to leave for so long again, I’ll definitely beat you to death... A hundred years, Cheng Qian, an ordinary mortal’s life would’ve slipped away just like that...”

At that moment, the composure that he’d struggled to maintain completely fell apart. Yan Zhengming held onto Cheng Qian as he hysterically wept and laughed, as if expressing everyone’s joy and sorrow all by himself. The others couldn’t even express their feelings as they anxiously stood on edge, fearing that after having Lord Beiming and a weasel as sect leaders, Fuyao Mountain would be succeeded by an insane sect leader next.

... That would be truly remarkable.

Somehow, the racket had stretched well into the middle of the night before Yan Zhengming finally calmed down. As usual, Shuikeng started a bonfire. The weather was hot and stuffy to begin with, so her martial brothers stayed far away from her.

Cheng Qian placed Shuangren across his knees and sat in meditation, regulating his breathing with the help of the sword’s cold aura. Yan Zhengming silently sat on the side to guard him.

Li Yun rudely poked Yan Zhengming from behind. “Sect Leader, has your insanity been cured?”

Yan Zhengming gave him a tired look and smiled self-deprecatingly, “It seems to have worsened.”

Li Yun clicked his tongue and asked, “Why does Xiao-Qian seem a bit averse to heat, he was never like this before, right?”

“Nn?” Yan Zhengming seemed a bit dazed as he asked back, “Really?”

Li Yun continued, “I remember that when we buried him on the uninhabited island with our own hands, his breathing and pulse had all stopped, and you had kept stalling until his entire body turned cold. There couldn’t have been any chance of life left, what do you think is going on here?”

Yan Zhengming absently responded, “I don’t know.”

Li Yun frowned as he kept pursuing his train of thoughts, “If we think about it, something had seemed really strange back then. That Zhou Hanzheng had completely overpowered us in the beginning, but as soon as Xiao-Qian appeared, his cultivation suddenly seemed like it had been suppressed greatly, do you think it has anything to do with this? Ah, Da-shixiong, I have a theory, do you think there’s the possibility that... When Xiao-Qian was separated from us, he met someone or obtained something important that allowed him to keep his life?”

Somehow, Li Yun had managed to figure out most of the happenings with his blind theorizing. But unfortunately, there was nobody to admire his wit, because Yan Zhengming didn’t seem to have heard a single word of those and didn’t show the slightest reaction.

Li Yun exclaimed, exasperated, “Da-shixiong!”

“Can’t you wait for him to wake up and ask those stuff yourself?” Yan Zhengming raised his hand to shoo Li Yun away impatiently, “How should I know? Are you done yet, you chatterbox, get lost!”

Li Yun, “...”

He finally saw that the sect leader’s brain had been completely muddled by his San-shidi. There was no remaining space to consider anything else, he couldn’t even care to think about how things had developed this way.

Yan Zhengming stopped acknowledging Li Yun and procured a snow-white hair tie from his bosom — it was said to be woven from the silk of snow silkworms, which came from beyond the Great Wall. The life of a snow silkworm was quite tough. It could live for three thousand years, but the silk it produced in all those years would only be enough to weave about one *cun* of material. The silk felt cool to the touch and could sell for extremely high prices in the black market. Even Yan Zhengming, the ‘Money-Hustling Young Master’, was only able to obtain this small ribbon, and could never find it in himself to use it.

He turned his energy into a thin thread at his fingertip, carving a Puppet Charm on top of this extremely priceless hair tie the way one would embroider it. His focus was impeccable, as if this was the sole purpose of his life. The task was completed with a flick of his finger, and the hair tie went toward Cheng Qian’s hair.

Li Yun sucked in a breath. “Da-shixiong, can you please keep your head?”

A single glance from Cheng Qian could frighten Li Yun’s golden cicada until it didn’t even dare to open its eyes, so he was clearly above the level of primordial spirit. A master of this level would always have their consciousness extended around them when they meditate, so even if they

were unaware of the surroundings, nothing would be able to get close easily.

Li Yun could almost see a large amount of gold being reduced to smithereens in the air and turned to Sect Leader Yan angrily — he finally understood what Sect Leader Yan meant by ‘worsened’ earlier.

Yan Zhengming, “Shh, look.”

The hair tie lightly flew onto Cheng Qian’s body, gathering up the hair that Yan Zhengming had struck earlier and nimbly making a knot. From the beginning to the end, it didn’t meet any resistance.

This meant that when Cheng Qian fell into meditation, he was completely unguarded.

Li Yun’s expression shifted a few times. At last, he sighed lightly. “The deep blue sea has turned into mulberry fields, but why does it seem like he hasn’t changed at all?”

Yan Zhengming smiled. His eyes drooped drowsily as he spoke in a low voice, “I really want to unseal Fuyao Mountain and go home.”

Hearing this, Li Yun’s face turned solemn. “Sect Leader, you’d better not act rashly. Are you sure this is a good time? Those people are always watching.”

The corners of Yan Zhengming’s lips curled into a sneer, “They’re just a bunch of contemptible scoundrels, if they dare make a move, I’ll make it so they’re unable to walk away... That’s not the reason I never unsealed the mountain.”

Li Yun had never heard Yan Zhengming talk about this, and had always thought that he knew the reason even without clarifying. He couldn't help asking in confusion, "Then why is it?"

"I can't unseal it." Yan Zhengming said with a level expression.

Li Yun abruptly flipped over to sit upright, "What?"

"Be more steadfast, don't make a fuss over everything," Yan Zhengming frowned in displeasure before continuing, "The Sect Leader's Seal has three great locks to the Mountain-Sealing Decree: 'Heaven', 'Earth', and 'Man'. In front of the 'Lock of Man', the key that Shifu left when he sealed the mountain had been the cores of all five of us. Back then, because of Xiao-Qian... I didn't even look at the key for 'Heaven' and 'Earth'."

Li Yun, "..."

No wonder Da-shixiong's face looked so nasty after entering the Sect Leader's Seal for the first time!

Li Yun lowered his voice, "Why didn't you say anything in the past?"

"What use would there be?" Yan Zhengming yawned, "I've always been searching for a way to go around the Mountain-Sealing Decree. The Sect Leader's Seal has its own consciousness too. Even though I don't know the extent of its power, I could sense its existence in these past years. I originally thought that if I could become powerful enough to suppress the consciousness in the Sect Leader's Seal, I might be able to forcefully unseal the mountain."

Li Yun asked in fear, "How powerful do you have to be?"

Yan Zhengming's eyelids fluttered shut as he spoke vaguely, "The consciousness in the Sect Leader's Seal is accumulated from our sect's past leaders. What do you think?"

Li Yun, "..."

Yan Zhengming said in a low voice, "That's why telling you guys would be useless, our path ahead is still very long..."

His voice kept trailing off, the end of his sentence almost inaudible. Li Yun said, stupefied, "From what I can tell, this path isn't long, it's actually endless!"

Yan Zhengming made no sound in response. Li Yun, both mentally and physically exhausted, gave a long sigh and lay himself down on his back, consoling himself, "Xiao-Qian is finally back now, Xiao-Yuan... Ah, even though it's a bit more difficult, it's not completely impossible. There's still hope, right?"

Nobody answered him — Cheng Qian was meditating without a sound. Shuikeng had fallen asleep curled up next to the bonfire. Her natural element was fire, so she wouldn't be burned even if her hair fell in the flames. The small sparks jumped around her black hair, as if dancing happily.

In the midsummer night, the sound of cicadas could be heard from all around them, emphasizing the silence of this place. Above, the Milky Way stretched out like silk in the night sky, cradling thousands of spots of light. Each glittering light seemed to represent the endless years.

Winter comes with the departure of summer, trees flourish and wither with the passage of time.

When Li Yun looked again, he saw that Yan Zhengming had fallen asleep leaning on one side. After experiencing such great joy and sorrow in a short period of time, there was a hint of weariness that hadn't appeared in ages between his brows. But the dark shadow over his face had disappeared.

Hope would always exist, no matter what.

[1] '*xinmo*' The phrase used here is , which literally means 'heart demon'. It's basically the demon that resides in one's heart, which can also be understood as the flaws and obstacles of a person's mind. It can be hatred, greed, obsession, or resentment.

As soon as Cheng Qian opened his eyes, he was startled by the back of a head, which looked like a feather duster. And then he watched, stupefied, as the feather duster turned around and called out to him energetically, “San-shixiong!”

The previous night felt like an illusion. Cheng Qian was still a little out of it, so he asked blankly, “What are those on your head?”

Shuikeng said, extremely pleased, “Seven-colored sparrow plumes, do they look good?”

“...” Cheng Qian struggled very hard to be mindful with his words. After a moment of silence, he said sincerely, “They’re a bit blinding.”

Shuikeng’s eyes sharpened. Then she looked over his plain and neat long robes, which were neither new or old, and felt relieved. With some kind of charitable grudgingness, she said, “Fine, you won’t understand whether they look good anyway — hurry here, we’re returning to the mountain village.”

Cheng Qian really wanted to throw the words ‘won’t understand’ back in her face, but being apart for so long made things feel a bit unfamiliar. So he said nothing and only lowered his gaze slightly, turning his eyes away as he asked, “What mountain village?”

Shuikeng, “It’s our new home!”

Cheng Qian put away the travel expense that Valley Lord Nian had given him, equipping himself with Shuangren. He followed Shuikeng through the forest next to the clearing and looked up to find Yan Zhengming, who was waiting for them at a higher location. Even though Cheng Qian never cared much about the way other people dressed, at that moment, he was still amazed.

Da-shixiong seemed to have practiced some kind of bizarre cultivation method these past years. Even out in the wilderness, he could still change his clothes and dress himself so neatly, taking such meticulous care of his appearance it seemed like he was glowing. In his hand was a folding fan that he'd gotten from heavens knew where, which he was slapping against his palm arhythmically... He was like a completely different person from that one last night.

In front of Shuikeng, the mountain chicken in human form, the contrast was quite great, giving him the air of a banished immortal.

Cheng Qian looked at Shuikeng with a complicated feeling, thinking: this child had been raised wrong by the sect leader. She had learned how to put on the airs of being a narcissist, but hadn't truly mastered the art of being a narcissist.

Shuikeng looked around searchingly and asked in confusion, "Eh? Where's Er-shixiong?"

"He's going to figure out Han Yuan's arrays, he already went back last night," Yan Zhengming swept his eyes over Shuikeng, with the chicken feathers all over her head. He was really itching to give her a round of scolding, but due to certain reasons, he held himself back from saying anything. He forced a neutral look on his face and said, "You, run an errand for me too. Zheshi has a letter for us, go quickly and hurry back."

Shuikeng was stunned for a moment, and then she said with slight disappointment, “Oh, I wanted to spend more time with San-shixiong.”

Yan Zhengming thought, dissatisfied, *She’s grown so big, yet she can’t read the room at all.*

But those words were very inappropriate to voice out loud, so he could only say in a dignified manner, “Since he has returned, he won’t leave again. If you have anything you want to say, you can say them after returning. Important things come first.”

While Shuikeng’s wings had developed, she was still quite simple-minded. She immediately believed her Da-shixiong’s ‘important things’ nonsense, and gave Cheng Qian a look that spoke of her reluctance to part. When she saw him nod, promising not to leave, she finally turned into a small bird and flew off.

After sending off the last obstacle, Yan Zhengming didn’t even get to feel happy before a strange nervousness suddenly rose in his heart. He scorned himself silently for a moment, trying to fool himself as he thought, *I watched this kid grow up, what am I nervous for?*

Cheng Qian’s guilt had not disappeared, so when he saw that Yan Zhengming seemed like he had something to say, he obediently stood aside to wait. But after waiting for a long while, there still wasn’t a single peep, so he was bewildered.

Yan Zhengming swept his eyes over him, accidentally meeting Cheng Qian’s gaze. He quickly looked away again, thinking irritably, *Heck, still nervous, damn it.*

And so he turned around, putting on the face of a sect leader who treasured his words like gold. “Let’s go.”

Then he rose into the sky on his sword and waited for Cheng Qian in the air, his sleeves fluttering around him. His posture was quite a great bluff. At a glance, he really seemed to possess the calm bearing of an actual sect leader. Cheng Qian immediately followed. Thinking back to Da-shixiong's past good-for-nothing attitude, and then looking at the back in front of him right now, his heart became more and more unsettled.

A few questions rose in Yan Zhengming's heart. At last, he picked the one he cared most about at the moment, so he asked, "Who gave you that sword?"

That thing stood out like a sore thumb, it definitely wasn't something Cheng Qian had gotten himself. Perhaps some shady person had forced it onto him.

Cheng Qian answered, "It's a present from Valley Lord Nian of Mingming Valley."

Yan Zhengming recalled Shuikeng's recount of the previous day, and guessed that the 'Valley Lord Elder' Nian Mingming had spoken of was Cheng Qian. Some unreasonable anger immediately rose in his chest. "Mingming Valley? When I went there before, that old fatty didn't even mention this, is he trying to snatch you away? Hmph, he's overestimating himself."

The innocent Valley Lord Nian could probably feel his ears heating up right about then.

Yan Zhengming continued asking, "Why did you run off to Mingming Valley?"

Cheng Qian, "To borrow his sect's icy lake to rebuild my physical body."

Yan Zhengming frowned. He finally cast away his unimportant thoughts and said solemnly, “As far as I know, other than the primordial spirit being reincarnated, there is no way to rebuild the physical body. Otherwise, back then, Shifu wouldn’t have...”

Cheng Qian thought it over and answered succinctly, “Probably because I happened to have cultivated my primordial spirit in the Spirit-Condensing Jade.”

“Now what’s the Spirit-Condensing Jade?” Yan Zhengming said impatiently, “Can’t you start explaining from the beginning?”

There was no real beginning to this matter, it was a long story. Cheng Qian paused, struggling hard to find a beginning, and started from how he and Han Yuan had accidentally met Tang Zhen, to the Spirit-Condensing Jade that Wen Ya had given him, and then how he had finally rebuilt his physical body in the Mingming Valley. But he left out the excruciating pain in the Spirit-Condensing Jade and the seven Major Heavenly Tribulations in Mingming Valley.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t as if Yan Zhengming had never seen the world, how could he not know about the primordial spirit?

Even cultivating a primordial spirit in one’s own body required them to experience numerous trials — because there was no construction without destruction — let alone cultivating in an outside object. Besides, molding a physical body from an outside object was completely unheard of since ancient times. If it really was as easy as Cheng Qian made it to be, all of the different races would’ve long since turned into humans, why would they work so hard to cultivate?

Let’s not mention the icy lake. Even if they had soaked in lava for decades, they would probably only be able to produce a cooked jade.

Yan Zhengming pressed on, “Even if it was a celestial artifact, could a piece of jade really be molded just by soaking it in an icy lake? Impossible, tell the truth.”

Cheng Qian was starting to change his view of Yan Zhengming. To think that the young master from back then, who would get in a monk’s face to call them bald and then be confused why they were angry, would one day become so observant and careful. Seeing that he couldn’t hide the truth, he could only say, “Since it’s going against the heavens, naturally, there would be Heavenly Tribulations.”

Yan Zhengming’s sword immediately halted in midair. “What?”

His voice was hoarse for a moment, “Were they... Major Heavenly Tribulations or Minor Heavenly Tribulations?”

If cultivators advanced too quickly, they would also experience Heavenly Tribulations. Normally, there would only be three to five strikes, and the Nine Divine Thunders would be the most lethal. It represented a small punishment to prevent a fatal mistake, it was the heavens warning the common folk to practice restraint in cultivating, that they shouldn’t be too full of themselves — this was called the ‘Minor Heavenly Tribulation’.

Only when a formidable master ascended would a Major Heavenly Tribulation descend from the heavens. Even if the ones experiencing the tribulation had the abilities to topple the mountains and overturn the oceans, or produce clouds and rain with a wave of their hands, they would only be able to narrowly escape death through this experience — a mere nobody fighting for survival with the heavens was a great disrespect to begin with, let alone delusionally wanting to share their life with the heavens and the earth [1].

It was said that during a Major Heavenly Tribulation, the lightning strikes would come down like pouring rain. There was no possible way to resist, and not a single artifact in the mortal world could protect against it.

Cheng Qian hesitated, “Uh...”

Yan Zhengming immediately became certain, “They were Major Heavenly Tribulations.”

Cheng Qian said indifferently, as if it was nothing, “Oh, that can’t be. I’ve always been in seclusion, my knowledge is limited. I’ve never heard that the Heavenly Tribulations were classified as Major and Minor.”

In this regard, Cheng Qian, who had always been good at putting on an act since he was a child, was truly much more skilled than Shuikeng. After saying those words, he continued asking with an appropriate amount of curiosity, “What’s a Major Heavenly Tribulation?”

Yan Zhengming looked at him without a word.

Cheng Qian then added casually to play it down, “In any case, I’ve endured it, but it didn’t seem that formidable. It’s probably a minor one?”

Yan Zhengming’s gaze was starting to turn dark. It was just like when he was younger, if someone had overturned his incense burner, he wouldn’t say a word as he kept staring. Even his eyelashes seemed to be saying ‘I’m very upset, hurry and apologize to me’.

In the past, Cheng Qian would usually think ‘To hell with your bad habit’ impatiently, and then examine the seriousness of the situation to decide whether he should offer some half-hearted appeasement. But after so many years apart, his heart suddenly felt very tender — when he was trapped on the verge of death in the Spirit-Condensing Jade, Da-shixiong’s nasty

temper, Er-shixiong's toads, Si-shidi's troubles, and even little Shimei's endless diapers; all of them had been unattainable things that he cherished the memory of.

Cheng Qian suddenly smiled. The slightly upturned corners of his eyes turned into refined curves. He avoided addressing the issue of the Heavenly Tribulation and said coaxingly, "Shixiong, I missed you all very much."

Yan Zhengming, "..."

His heart suddenly started racing. He tossed the words 'almost there' in a panic and left Cheng Qian behind, abruptly charging under the clouds to escape.

At the same time, Sect Leader Yan, like a hero who had been sidetracked by matters of the heart, thought, *Don't think I won't pursue this matter, after I get back, I'm sending a letter to the old fatty of Mingming Valley for details.*

Cheng Qian originally thought that the 'mountain village' was deep in the forest on some mountain, but it was an actual mountain village located at the outskirts of a town at the foot of a mountain. There was a vast expanse of fertile land, farmers were tilling the lands and going about their farms. It was busy, but not disorderly.

They landed on the mountain and started walking down. Looking from the distance, they could see the heavy traffic of the marketplace not too far away.

If anyone were to see this, they would think that this was just a common landlord's dwelling.

But after entering the mountain village, Cheng Qian understood why Yan Zhengming had bought this residence.

There was no knowing who the previous lord of this mountain village was, but this place was near the mountain and had a good source of water. Its topography was very refined. The spiritual energy of the green mountains was gathered here. Looking around, it was quite on par with Azure Dragon Island, the Celestial Mountain of the East Sea.

“I’ve enhanced the courtyard’s walls,” Yan Zhengming said, “There are charms under the bricks, so the spiritual energy in the residence won’t leak out — even if it’s no match for Fuyao Mountain’s profound foundation, it’s definitely a bit better than Mingming Valley.”

He was still sulking... Cheng Qian couldn’t find the words to reply, so he only nodded in agreement.

Circling around the outer courtyard, one could see that there were all sorts of buildings in here. Occasionally, the page boys in charge of sweeping the courtyard would pass by, all of them doing so quietly. Inside, past a flower garden, was the inner residence. The green trees were dense in this place, as if it was a sea of bamboo. As soon as one stepped in, they would feel the heat of summer disappearing without a trace. Walking amid the trees, one couldn’t help treading softly, so they wouldn’t disturb the tranquility of this place.

“The others aren’t allowed in here, you won’t be disturbed even if you went into seclusion,” Yan Zhengming said, “Follow me.”

He led Cheng Qian to the center of the bamboo forest. There was a small courtyard in there, with a wooden tablet hung on the entrance, which had the words ‘Qing’an’ written on it. A light breeze blew past, rustling the bamboo leaves. As Cheng Qian stood in front of the courtyard, he was stunned for some time. It felt as if he had returned to the long gone Fuyao Mountain.

In the courtyard, the door to the study was half-shut. The four treasures of the study were spread out on the table. A half-written scroll of *Scriptures on Clarity and Stillness* was laid out on the table, as if the master of this place had never left.

Yan Zhengming took advantage of the time Cheng Qian spent looking around to hurriedly hide the half-written scroll in his sleeve. He then spoke to Cheng Qian casually, “I... uh, I remember that your Qing’an Dwelling had been like this. Is there anywhere that’s different?”

Cheng Qian looked at the window with lifelike decorative carvings, the tray with charms to chill tea, the soft chair that seemed like it could swallow a person, and the scent of incense wafting from the side. With one sweep of the eyes, it was clear whose territory this place used to be. He thought, *It’s truly not even close.*

But when he saw Yan Zhengming’s fake composed look, he lied without even blinking, “No, it could almost be mistaken for the real thing.”

Yan Zhengming first sighed heavily in relief, and then he struggled to recompose himself and spoke in a ‘sect leader’-like manner, “That’s good. This place was kept for you, stay here.”

After that, his face turned solemn. His voice carried some threat as he told Cheng Qian with a glare, “Have you marked my words? If you dare to leave the home without a word or reason again, I’ll kick you out of the sect.”

Cheng Qian felt both humored and helpless, so he couldn’t help firing back, “Are you done yet?”

All along the way, he never protested no matter what, remaining so respectful that Yan Zhengming couldn’t rest easy, because it felt so unreal.

After finally hearing that familiar tone of voice, it felt like a large rock in his heart had been dropped, and things finally felt real.

Yan Zhengming asked himself bitterly, *Does this mean you can't stand him being nice to you, lowly bastard?*

Then the lowly bastard came forward and hugged Cheng Qian from behind. The instant his arms tightened, Yan Zhengming closed his eyes and held his breath, as if holding back some kind of odd feeling. After just a brief moment, he loosened his arms and patted Cheng Qian's shoulder intimately. "Alright, rest up properly."

And then he left with the half-written scroll of *Scriptures on Clarity and Stillness*. Only after leaving the bamboo forest did he release his held breath. He then went on his way, fully satisfied, and sauntered over next door. With single-hearted focus, his primordial spirit went into the Sect Leader's Seal, carefully examining the Mountain-Sealing Decree that Shifu had left behind.

Even though Cheng Qian only answered as asked and left out so much details, Yan Zhengming could acutely sense that the process of him returning to life from death's grip seemed to fulfill the Three Tribulations of 'Heaven, Earth, and Man'. It corresponded perfectly with the three great locks of the Mountain-Sealing Decree... Was it a coincidence?

He experimentally tried to oppose the consciousness in the Sect Leader's Seal with his own primordial spirit. The Sect Leader's Seal was very lenient with him, it wouldn't harm him. As if pardoning a thoughtless junior, it only flicked back against him lightly, showing him that he was just an ant trying to shake a tree, that he was still far inferior, so he shouldn't play too many tricks.

Yan Zhengming went around the ‘Lock of Man’, which he was already well aware of, and turned to stand in front of the ‘Lock of Earth’. He sent his consciousness in it, and saw that there were four squares inside, colored azure, white, scarlet, and black [2], each of them facing the four directions. There was a keyhole in each square. Three of the locks were shut tightly, only the lock belonging to the Azure Dragon was already open.

What was going on here?

[1] ‘*share their life with the heavens and the earth*’ The word used here is . It basically means ‘to share one’s life force and age with the heavens and the earth’.

[2] ‘*azure, white, scarlet, and black*’ The phrase used here is . These colors are commonly used to represent the four guardian spirits: Azure Dragon of the East, White Tiger of the West, Scarlet Bird of the South, and Black Tortoise of the North.

Even though he always had it hanging around his neck, this was actually only the second time Yan Zhengming sent his primordial spirit into the Sect Leader's Seal — the first time was an accident, he didn't know what the deal with this thing was at the time.

But at this moment, his feelings were completely different.

Even now, Yan Zhengming remembered that when he first saw the Mountain-Sealing Decree, he came very close to not wanting to live anymore.

He felt like he had ignorantly muddled through his entire life. The one and only important oath he had ever made, was to someday return to Fuyao Mountain and bring back Xiao-Qian, who was suffering on the uninhabited island on the East Sea. If he couldn't even accomplish this, he truly didn't know what use there was for him to live.

Fortunately, they happened to have encountered Shuikeng's Tribulation from the growth of her *yao* bone. Shuikeng's *yao* bone grew a half *cun* every ten years. As a half-*yao*, the human half of her was both helping her and harming her. On one hand, humans were the most intelligent beings in the world, so their gift in cultivating was much greater than beastly creatures. On the other hand, as she grew up gradually, her weak mixed-blood body became unable to withstand the increasing growth of the Heavenly *Yao*'s aura. Before her cultivation reached a certain point, every time her *yao* bone grew, there had to be someone to help suppress the *yao* aura from outside.

Li Yun, the good-for-nothing, was obviously incapable of doing this. Even though Yan Zhengming would occasionally feel that there was no meaning to life, he had never been able to really abandon those two. Truly, he didn't even have the freedom to end his own life.

But it was also fortunate that those two nuisances were there.

He circled around in place a few times and still couldn't find any clue, so he calmly turned to the Lock of Heaven.

The Lock of Heaven's appearance was even more bizarre. While it had a transparent outer shell, there was a starry sky inside of it. The thousands of millions of stars looked like innumerable dots of dust, boundless and limitless, aimlessly scattered all over the place. Occasionally their glow brightened, occasionally they dimmed. There was no fixed point in there, other than a small needle-sized hole in the corner. Yan Zhengming focused on examining it with bated breath for a long time and saw that some of the tiny particles would occasionally bump near the small hole. But either because their shape wasn't right, or the size wasn't right, or they came from the wrong angle, not a single one of them fell out.

Yan Zhengming circled around the Lock of Heaven, which only left one way out, and realized that there was no other opening besides that small hole. Surprisingly, his consciousness couldn't get in at all.

A strange guess suddenly appeared in his heart — could it be... Amid the innumerable stardust, only a single one could exit from this hole? Its size and shape had to be exactly the same as the hole, and it had to come from a certain angle in order to exit?

Could it be, the Lock of Heaven's meaning was 'try as one might, destiny still decides one's fate'?

When this thought occurred to him, Yan Zhengming felt a bit helpless, but he wasn't too disappointed — it seemed like ever since Cheng Qian returned, all of his worries and doubts had died down immediately. Yan Zhengming suddenly seemed to have been enlightened.

He thought, *Cultivating is a matter that depends greatly on luck to begin with. Looking at it this way, it seems reasonable. If the Lock of Heaven can't be unlocked no matter what, maybe that is fate.*

The last time he entered the Sect Leader's Seal, he had been so upset by the merciless 'Lock of Man' that he wanted to die. This time, he had encountered the confusing 'Lock of Earth' and the unreasonable 'Lock of Heaven', but he was miraculously not angry at all. The challenges people had endured were one factor that decided how they accepted life, but their mental fortitude was also very important.

In any case, he believed that they would be able to return to Fuyao Mountain one day. Even if their generation couldn't, and were only able to unlock the 'Lock of Man', there were still the next generations to unlock the 'Lock of Earth'. Even if the 'Lock of Heaven' could only be unlocked by chance, as long as their sect's succession wasn't broken, they still had thousands of generations and millions of years.

With enough time, even the impossible could become possible.

As long as the people were around, anywhere could be a home.

Yan Zhengming's state of mind abruptly became open. In that instant, his mind completely entered the Sect Leader's Seal. The dignified and calm consciousness of the Sect Leader's Seal finally admitted him in. In this place, there seemed to be an entire other world. Yan Zhengming's cultivation, which had been stuck at a bottleneck for some time, suddenly

seemed like it was about to break through, so he simply went into meditation in front of the Lock of Heaven.

The glittering stardust in the Lock of Heaven cast their light on his face. Yan Zhengming could clearly feel the minute shift in his own state of mind, and couldn't help the corners of his lips curling into a gentle smile. When he thought of Cheng Qian, he suddenly felt like there was nothing else that he desired in this life.

Even if he had only achieved that state for a short while, that instance was enough for him to glimpse a broader world.

As the consciousness in the Sect Leader's Seal cleared out his meridians, Yan Zhengming's consciousness became connected with it. Gradually, he found some fragments of scenes from within. All of them had faces he didn't recognize, the images flickering past. They seemed to be memories within the Sect Leader's Seal.

Suddenly, Yan Zhengming acutely spotted a certain fragment. He could recognize the familiar scene with a single glance, it was Azure Dragon Island one hundred years ago, which had fallen into chaos — Island Lord Gu Yanxue was battling Tang Yao fiercely on the surface, but he was secretly telling them to leave.

At the moment, Yan Zhengming was looking from a spectator's point of view. He saw that while the Island Lord was sending his message, he was also quickly murmuring some chants. Those words contained his energy, and went straight into the Sect Leader's Seal.

A creaking sound was heard, waking Yan Zhengming from his meditation. The next moment, his primordial spirit was expelled by the Sect Leader's Seal and fell into his own body. Yan Zhengming started as he opened his

eyes and found that beyond the window, it was already early morning. He had stayed in the Sect Leader's Seal for a day and a night.

Yan Zhengming frowned as he carefully thought back on his memories. Back then on the Azure Dragon Island, because his cultivation was truly limited and his heart was in great turmoil, he had surprisingly not noticed the Island Lord's chants at all.

Then, the Azure Dragon square in the Lock of Earth... was opened by Island Lord Gu?

Yan Zhengming frowned, thinking back to the Four Saints, one of whom had died while the remaining three were injured. He thought, *Could it be, the chants for the Lock of Earth were kept by the Four Saints?*

He became even more confused whether his Shizu, whose identity was a mystery, was actually foes or allies with the Four Saints.

Besides, it would've been fine if they had been any other people, but one of them had been directly killed by his Shizu. If that person really had one of the locks, who was he supposed to ask for the chants now?

While Yan Zhengming was pondering this, Li Yun suddenly slammed the door open and burst in.

Li Yun's series of actions were completely natural, it was clear that he did this often. Yan Zhengming rolled his eyes toward the heavens, thinking: it really would be fine for him to not be the leader of this barbaric sect. His Shidi and Shimei never cared about any manners or whatever and just barged in as they liked for the most trivial matters, to the point that he didn't even dare to bathe during the day now.

Cheng Qian entered after Li Yun in an unhurried manner. While Yan Zhengming was wondering why they had come together, he heard Li Yun exclaim without any inhibition, “You’re really making it hard to find you. I didn’t even know you’ve come back here, didn’t you use to always stay at the bamboo forest?”

Right in front of Cheng Qian, Yan Zhengming’s face instantly turned bright red. He snapped at Li Yun angrily, “When did I ever ‘always’ stay at the bamboo forest? I just... just go there occasionally to clean!”

Li Yun seemed like he didn’t understand what he meant and said casually, “That’s not it, out of ten times I went to look for you, you would be there about nine times.”

After that, this loose-tongued brat turned to tell Cheng Qian teasingly, “As soon as you returned, we’ve been left for the stepmother to raise. Even the sect leader’s favorite courtyard has been given to you — eh, speaking of which, wasn’t San-shidi’s courtyard back on Fuyao Mountain also called ‘Qing’an Dwelling’...”

Yan Zhengming, “...”

Every line was a critical hit, bringing up everything that shouldn’t be brought up. This wasn’t a skill that an ordinary person could possess.

Yan Zhengming didn’t dare to look at Cheng Qian’s expression, so he yelled at Li Yun angrily instead, “Shut up, has your etiquette been eaten by a dog?”

Li Yun said in confusion, “Ah? Did our sect ever have any etiquette to speak of?”

“...” Yan Zhengming truly couldn’t reason with him, so he only said powerlessly, “Scram!”

Lowering his face, Li Yun hid the hint of a mischievous smile at the corners of his lips and faked a solemn look, “I haven’t even gotten to the real deal yet, but you’re telling me to scram, tch... Xiao-Qian, you have no idea, these past years, Da-shixiong’s temper has become more and more unpredictable.”

Cheng Qian replied mildly, “Unpredictable temper is back when my mother was about to give birth to my little brother, this is nothing.”

His temperate courteousness carried a familiar feeling that washed all over Yan Zhengming. Because of this, he couldn’t even express his anger, and could only seethe impotently.

On the side, Li Yun was laughing like a madman.

After thoroughly roasting their sect leader, Li Yun finally sat on the floor, fully satisfied. He reached out to summon a large piece of paper from the desk and spread it open. Then he spoke solemnly, “I’ve examined Xiao-Yuan’s arrays thoroughly, look.”

As he spoke, Li Yun grasped a writing brush made of weasel hair and started drawing on the paper, “He had placed a circle of traps on the outer circle. Da-shixiong had ruined it in a single slash back then, so I can’t figure out if there’s any secret with them. But the one in the middle here, I’ve figured out — this is an array to search for a mountain’s vein, also known as the technique of ‘Spirit-Searching’.”

What they referred to as the ‘mountain vein’ was also known as the ‘spiritual vein’ in some places.

The reason mountains and rivers could have spiritual properties was because their mountain veins were intact. When a mountain's vein had been broken, the spiritual energy would immediately disperse, and it would just turn into a hillock. Because of this, the 'mountain vein' was the true 'lifeline of a mountain'. Usually, a sect's base would have arrays dedicated to protecting and hiding the mountain veins as a precaution against outsiders with malicious intent. The method to break through this was called the 'Spirit-Searching Technique'."

Cheng Qian said, "Could it be, he's planning to sever Fuyao Mountain's vein? If Fuyao Mountain really became a dead mountain due to the spiritual energy leaking out, the secret realm might really lose effect, and the mountain would be unsealed... But why would he want a dead mountain?"

"Probably for the Wish-Granting Stone," Li Yun said, "You have no idea, back then, Island Lord Gu never spoke of the stone's whereabouts until he died. Those people couldn't find anything on the Azure Dragon Island either, so things had been chaotic for some time, and the remaining two of the Four Saints almost became the target of public criticism. They then made lethal oaths on their own cultivation and life force, swearing that they had never seen that thing. Xiao-Yuan... the demon possessing him must think that the stone is on Fuyao Mountain."

"The mountain vein won't be found so easily," Yan Zhengming cut in, "Otherwise, would we wait for him to find it? I've been searching very thoroughly these past years."

"No, the Spirit-Searching Technique isn't a common technique," Li Yun said, "Do you remember that technique he used to escape? Disappearing into thin air, leaving only a paper cutout of a person on the ground — that's called the technique of 'Living Soul Death Substitution'. It's a technique mostly associated with demonic cultivators, which uses a paper cutout of a person to summon a living soul from somewhere else to take a lethal strike

in your place. ‘Spirit-Searching Technique’ and ‘Living Soul Death Substitution’... It’s rare to find anyone who knows both of these rare demonic techniques.”

When Li Yun reached this point, he paused mysteriously.

Cheng Qian thought, *Is he going to continue next time?*

Yan Zhengming said impatiently, “Speak up if you have anything to say. Don’t stall!”

Li Yun finally said, “In my knowledge, the only people who would know these two almost lost demonic techniques would be the ‘Nightmare Walkers’.”

Cheng Qian, who paid very little attention to outside matters, immediately asked, “What are Nightmare Walkers?”

“A group of demonic cultivators,” Yan Zhengming said absently, “Demonic cultivators each had their own tyrannical tendencies and taboos, so they usually keep to themselves and rarely group together. The ‘Nightmare Walkers’ are the only ones who had somehow managed to gather these demonic cultivators and called themselves a sect... In any case, they’ve never done anything good. Just from what I’ve heard, most of the bigger sects have sent out many orders for their capture... How did Han Yuan end up together with them?”

When he spoke to this point, Yan Zhengming’s heart sank. If Han Yuan had been all by himself these past years, he might still be salvageable. But if he had gotten involved with the greatest demonic sect...

“It’s alright, Shixiong, at least we have a general direction now,” Li Yun casually swung the ink-soaked writing brush and said, “The Nightmare

Walkers mostly appear around Nanjiang. That place has a bad atmosphere, some speculate that their hideout is right there. Should we go to look?”

Yan Zhengming hesitated. Nanjiang was a very unhealthy place. Moreover, even though the ‘Nightmare Walkers’ had been committing countless evils for so long, nobody dared to cross them carelessly. There must be a reason for this.

But Han Yuan...

Yan Zhengming and the others had heard of the happenings at the foot of Fuyao Mountain from Shuikeng, including the fact that Han Yuan and the demonic cultivator didn’t share the same consciousness — if Han Yuan had truly fallen into the demonic path, there wouldn’t have been any excuses. They would just follow the sect rules to cleanse the sect of any filth, not even Shifu could protest. But he hadn’t.

That was their little Shidi, for whom they had broken into the Yao Valley to rescue all those years ago despite not having any energy feel. Even though he had always been quite worthless, as long as there was a single shred of hope, how could they give up on him?

At last, Yan Zhengming made the final decision, “Alright, when Shuikeng returns, we’ll go to Nanjiang.”

Cheng Qian had nothing to say against this, so he turned to leave. But before he could even lift his foot, Yan Zhengming suddenly called out to him.

“Wait, Xiao-Qian,” As soon as Yan Zhengming called out, he could already feel that he was being a little stupid, but if he didn’t say these words, he would feel like there was a fishbone stuck in his throat. After hesitating for a long while, he tried to explain, though it only made things worse, “I

occasionally went to the bamboo forest in the past... because that place is nice and cool, not because I live there.”

Cheng Qian had no idea why he was explaining this, so he turned around in bewilderment, “Nn, so?”

Yan Zhengming couldn’t find the words to reply. Li Yun seemed like he would go mad from laughing.

Cheng Qian said, “If you feel hot now, you can also come to stay there. It’s not like I take up a lot of space.”

Back then on the Azure Dragon Island, the boys frequently stayed at each other’s places. Cheng Qian often lazed around in Da-shixiong’s room, too. Now, the others had experienced a hundred years, but his mind still remained in his youth. He didn’t feel that there was anything wrong at all.

Yan Zhengming’s face turned red hearing those words.

It would have been fine if he had only been agitated, but his sweaty hands accidentally brushed against the copper coin ring, unwittingly summoning the phantom in the copper coin.

Cheng Qian watched, shocked, as the young version of himself appeared like a wandering ghost from a strange coin, expressionlessly cutting across his sight —

How would it feel to look at another you, floating in the air?

Especially when this ‘you’ had a cold expression and a frosty gaze, as if he had some kind of great grudge against the world.

In any case, Cheng Qian was a bit creeped out. He couldn’t help retreating one step, thinking, *What on earth is this thing?*

This thought had just occurred to him when the floating ‘Cheng Qian’ came in front of him, raising a hand to strike his face.

Cheng Qian, “...”

Of course, even if he had been startled by this thing, he wouldn’t be hit by some phantom so easily. With a slight shift of his foot, Cheng Qian had instantly moved away tens of *zhang* and landed outside the house. He stood on top of the wall and looked on with a strange face as Yan Zhengming fumbled around, summoning the ‘ghost’ back into the ring. “What is this?”

Yan Zhengming was at a loss what to say to explain himself as he stood covering his own index finger. He had just been enlightened for a short time, but now he was back to wishing for death.

Li Yun immediately stepped up to ‘assist’ the Sect Leader with a helpful explanation, “It’s an Imitation Spirit.”

Since it was called an ‘Imitation Spirit’, it naturally corresponded to a ‘True Spirit’. All things on earth possessed a soul. Things like ancient jades and ancient trees might become spirits with enough time. Taking those objects, which had spiritual energy but had not fully become spirits, and adding some simple charms, one could create an Imitation Spirit like this.

Even though Imitation Spirits looked like real people, they had no sentience or awareness. They could only do some mechanical things. Some Imitation Spirits that used to be weapons would have offensive properties, but most of them could only use one technique. Some of them would be able to do some simple tasks too, like passing a message or serving tea. In short, other than to fool some ordinary people, they weren’t very useful.

“I know that thing is called an Imitation Spirit,” Cheng Qian said, puzzled, “It... uh... why does it...”

Cheng Qian didn’t particularly feel that his own face was worth much, but when he saw this little Imitation Spirit, which looked exactly like him, he couldn’t help the strange feeling in his heart. He frowned, “... look like this?”

Yan Zhengming reacted in his desperate plight and covered Li Yun’s mouth. He finally managed to defend himself before this talkative brat could speak, “Because I would think of you when I see a copper coin, so I made this without much thought, ahem... That, uh, don’t think too much of it.”

Li Yun thought to himself, gloating over the misfortune of others, *Haha, he’s making matters worse.*

“What am I thinking too much of?” Cheng Qian squatted on top of the wall and asked, even more puzzled, “Besides, didn’t you carve that copper coin yourself?”

An Imitation Spirit could only be produced from its original material, a second-hand object that had been used before was no good. Cheng Qian still had this knowledge, at least. It seemed like he didn't know the things that he should know, but he would be very clear about the things that he shouldn't know.

Yan Zhengming immediately became unable to respond. In his heart, there was some kind of shame as if he had been caught in an affair... and the person who had caught him was very oblivious and kept standing around to look.

Cheng Qian, "Also, what was it about to do, raising its hand earlier, it wants to exchange blows with me?"

Li Yun easily escaped his petrified Da-shixiong's hold and said coolly, "It was about to slap you. It's an Imitation Spirit, it can't recognize people. It'll slap anyone who stands in front of it."

Yan Zhengming, "..."

When Cheng Qian heard this, his constantly calm and unruffled face finally seemed a bit shocked. He frowned, carefully thinking things over, and finally asked cautiously, "Da-shixiong, did I ever do anything I shouldn't have done to make you misunderstand? I don't slap people... or pull people's hair or scratch their faces."

"No, that's only..." Yan Zhengming was about to explain weakly, but he quickly came back to himself and realized that Cheng Qian was teasing him again. He immediately felt that he almost couldn't keep being their Da-shixiong. Pointing at Cheng Qian, he exclaimed, "Get your ass down here!"

Li Yun, who craved chaos and trouble, casually finished his Shixiong's words, "That's only because Da-shixiong had made a mistake when

creating this Imitation Spirit.”

Yan Zhengming, “What’s wrong with making a small harmless mistake!”

Li Yun snickered and added, “He originally wanted to make one that could keep him company for some late-night chats, so he could find some relief for his lonely nights.”

Cheng Qian, “...”

He suddenly felt awkward for some reason. It felt like Er-shixiong had dragged him into this mess too.

Especially the words ‘lonely nights’. No matter how he interpreted it, it felt off.

Li Yun, who had entertained himself with both his Shixiong and Shidi, felt great satisfaction physically and mentally. He happily allowed the Sect Leader to chase him out, waving his sword like a club.

Yan Zhengming, “I’ll have you know how many eyes the Horse King [1] has today!”

Li Yun, “Ah, Sect Leader, it wouldn’t be good if you turn your shame into anger.”

Yan Zhengming chased Li Yun all the way from the inner courtyard to the front courtyard. When he was met with the astounded eyes of the page boys, he finally stopped his footsteps in a manner that only made him more conspicuous. He straightened his face solemnly, sorted out his clothes, and sauntered over with a dignified air.

Laughing happily, Li Yun went up to him, keeping a shoulder's distance in between them. "I'm just teasing to make Xiao-Qian laugh."

Yan Zhengming said angrily, "Oh, so you need to do that at my expense? How admirable of you, Li Yun."

"The Sect Leader is a magnanimous person, of course he wouldn't hold this against me." Li Yun put on a show of insincerely buttering him up. Then he paused and became more solemn as he spoke again, "Did you notice, Xiao-Qian hasn't changed, but I feel like after returning this time... his presence seems to be lacking."

Yan Zhengming's footsteps halted.

Li Yun continued, "In the past, that kid often stirred up trouble, as if he couldn't get along with anyone, but he had always had his own energy and vigor, unlike now. If you take your eyes off him for a moment, it feels as if he doesn't exist. Even the flowers on the wall feel more alive than he does."

"Uh," Yan Zhengming responded shortly, then he summarily relayed the things that Cheng Qian had told him.

The more he listened, the graver Li Yun's expression became.

Yan Zhengming, "What is it?"

"Cultivating a physical body from a foreign object... I've never heard of something like this," Li Yun murmured, "Who is this Tang Zhen?"

Yan Zhengming said, "I heard from Xiao-Qian..."

Li Yun waved his hand, “Don’t just believe his words, don’t you understand your own Shidi? If anyone had earned his gratitude and loyalty, he would cross the oceans and walk through infernos for them. Sometimes he wouldn’t think too deeply about things, and even if he did, he wouldn’t necessarily keep note of them.”

Yan Zhengming remarked sarcastically, “Isn’t that so, aren’t you a smart one.”

Li Yun rolled his eyes at him. “The Soul-Consuming Lamp is an extremely sinister object, even someone like Shifu had lost his senses back then and ruined his own portrait. That Senior Tang had been trapped in the lamp for a hundred years, what kind of resolution is that? Tch, in any case, I’m a coward, no matter if he meant well or not, it’s quite terrifying if you think about it that way... Let’s return to Xiao-Qian — he definitely hadn’t told you the truth. The Spirit-Condensing Jade is a celestial artifact, it’s not for men to mould as they please. Committing such an insolent act, he must have experienced a Major Heavenly Tribulation. Maybe even more than one... Ah, Da-shixiong, where are you going? Has your tail caught on fire?”

Yan Zhengming, “I’m going to beat him to death!”

Cheng Qian sat alone on the wall of Yan Zhengming’s courtyard. When he looked down on the wild grass on the wall, he was suddenly reminded of the technique ‘Spring Upon a Withered Tree’.

The wild grass in the gap of the rock stirred slightly. After staying still for a moment, it suddenly sprouted back to life, as if awakening. Following Cheng Qian’s will, it grew out long flower vines, with small white flowers blooming one after another. It was surprisingly quite charming.

In Cheng Qian's heart, a strange feeling that he'd never had before suddenly appeared. He thought, *It came back to life.*

Yan Zhengming, who had originally declared that he was going to beat Cheng Qian to death, happened upon this scene as soon as he entered the courtyard. The wrath in his chest was immediately reduced to dust. Hearing his arrival, Cheng Qian raised his face and smiled. "Should I scam too?"

Yan Zhengming silently looked at the small white flowers on the wall. He couldn't quite express his anger, but he didn't want to let Cheng Qian off so easily either, so he made something up to jab at him, "White flowers on a grey wall, are you mourning or something? Hurry and change the color."

Cheng Qian laughed, "Negotiate with it yourself."

After that, he leapt off the wall and disappeared with a few skips.

Yan Zhengming stood still in place. When he recalled Li Yun saying 'Xiao-Qian had no living aura', he felt a bit doubtful, and couldn't help suspecting that Li Yun had let his imagination run wild again. He then walked to the wall, sliced off two bundles of the flower sprigs with his fingers, and brought them back to keep in a vase in his room.

At dusk, Yan Zhengming still couldn't settle his worries, so he went to the bamboo forest.

Cheng Qian was meditating, so Yan Zhengming didn't disturb him and looked around the room on his own.

The bed was clearly untouched. In the study, the writing brush was still resting on the ink slab. Even the tea on the shelf hadn't been reduced in the slightest. There was only a cup of cool water on the table.

Yan Zhengming frowned. He looked at Cheng Qian silently for a moment and thought, *What kind of place was Mingming Valley's icy lake?*

After staying fifty years at a place where dripping water instantly turned to ice, expecting him to immediately become lively... really seemed like a difficult task.

When Yan Zhengming considered this, he couldn't bear to continue with his criticism.

In the midst of the clear breeze and the bamboo forest, the consciousness in the Sect Leader's Seal seemed more distinct. Yan Zhengming had made some progress in it the previous day, so he silently went into meditation and sent his primordial spirit into the Sect Leader's Seal.

He still faced the wall in front of the Lock of Heaven, allowing the consciousness in the Sect Leader's Seal to lead him in deeper. When their consciousness became connected, those fragmented scenes flashed in front of his eyes again.

But this time, Yan Zhengming felt like he wasn't just an observer. All sorts of joys and sorrows within suddenly seemed real, that he couldn't help immersing in it. Gradually, he began to lose track of reality.

Amid the countless scenes, he saw Island Lord Gu again — this wasn't strange. Unlike Cheng Qian, he had never seen Shifu and Shizu's real forms, so from the close-knit previous generation of Fuyao Mountain, he only knew Gu Yanxue.

Island Lord Gu seemed to be much more energetic than when Yan Zhengming had met him. He was standing opposite of a middle-aged man. The hair on that person's temples was slightly white, his eye sockets were deep. In between them, there was a large water-like stone.

It was the one on Fuyao Mountain's Qing'an Dwelling — the one in Cheng Qian's courtyard.

Gu Yanxue was quickly saying some things, resting a skinny hand on the rock. He looked at the person opposite him with worry and shook his head. But the foreign man only listened silently, offering no response.

Yan Zhengming suddenly had a strong feeling that this foreign middle-aged man was deeply connected with himself, and couldn't help extending his consciousness deeper. The next instant, his vision spun. When Yan Zhengming came back to himself from the dizzying sensation, he found that Island Lord Gu was standing in front of him.

Yan Zhengming immediately understood that at this moment, he was standing in that foreign man's position, as if possessing him. He was startled and tried to leave, but then a great feeling of sorrow suddenly entered him, nailing him in place like a sharp blade.

At first, Yan Zhengming still knew clearly that this powerful feeling wasn't his own, and tried to fight his way out.

But that almost desperate sorrow, the bone-deep vengeance that couldn't be expressed, Yan Zhengming had experienced them all without fail. Those external emotions resounded with his heart, and in a short while, he couldn't help being carried away.

The unmatched resentment for the world, the deeply repressed wish that could never be granted, the heart-wrenching pain of having your nilin [2] carved out...

Right at that moment, a frosty cold aura suddenly burst in, thoroughly chilling Yan Zhengming. He abruptly started awake. The next moment, his vision spun as he was once again expelled by the Sect Leader's Seal. His

chest was still heaving violently, but he could faintly hear the sounds of thunder.

Cheng Qian had been startled awake by the muffled roars of thunder. Yan Zhengming had just broken through a Trial in his cultivation, which should have been a good thing. However, it seemed like before his cultivation could stabilize, he had been progressing unusually quickly, thanks to some unknown entity. Even if they disregarded him almost summoning a Minor Heavenly Tribulation, a red light had flashed in between his eyebrows. It seemed like he had progressed too rapidly and incurred some kind of xinmo.

Cheng Qian couldn't wake him, so he forcefully struck his own energy at the center of his back and finally dragged Yan Zhengming out of his meditation.

When Cheng Qian saw that Yan Zhengming still seemed dazed, he wanted to slap his face for a bit. But as soon as he raised his hand, Yan Zhengming reflexively backed off.

Cheng Qian helplessly waved his hand in front of Yan Zhengming's eyes, "Shixiong, look closely, I'm not that one who slaps people, I won't hit you. Are you awake now?"

Yan Zhengming's ears were ringing, he couldn't hear a word of what was said. His primordial spirit was out, but he himself was still dazed, unable to figure out his own whereabouts or what time it was. The sorrow filling his heart still lingered.

He abruptly caught Cheng Qian's hand, violently grasping it. A grievous voice seemed to be roaring in his heart, *This is mine, none of you can ever dream of taking what's mine away from me!*

That foreign gaze startled Cheng Qian. It looked like the eyes of a starving wolf on the brink of death.

In an instant, the sound of thunder seemed to be approaching again. Cheng Qian didn't dare to stall, so with frost forming on his other hand, he flicked the spot in between Yan Zhengming's brows, causing fine frost to form on the hair near his forehead. "Da-shixiong!"

Yan Zhengming started. His eyes abruptly softened, his grip also loosening as he raised his face in a daze, "... Xiao-Qian, what's wrong?"

Cheng Qian didn't reply. When he heard that the roars of thunder were turning distant, he finally relaxed. He frowned, "I should be asking what's wrong with you. You were going perfectly fine, why did you force your own cultivation up? You almost summoned a Minor Heavenly Tribulation... Have you encountered some kind of xinmo?"

These words immediately reminded Yan Zhengming of his earlier agitation, which was impossible to overlook. He felt guilty for some reason and avoided Cheng Qian's gaze, making up an excuse, "Uh... I'd seen some memories in the Sect Leader's Seal, I might have been a bit affected."

After Cheng Qian listened to his description, he said with certainty, "The person you saw must be Lord Beiming, our Shizu — could he be the old friend that Island Lord Gu had spoken of?"

This answer wasn't beyond his expectation. While Yan Zhengming was in the Sect Leader's Seal, he had reckoned that the foreign man should either be Shizu or Shifu's real form. At the moment, he was only listening absently. His heart was filled with the foreign emotions from earlier.

Cheng Qian saw that his complexion didn't seem well, so he halted his words. "Wouldn't it be better for you to rest a little?"

Yan Zhengming was feeling a bit uneasy to begin with, so when he heard these words, he readily accepted the suggestion and stood. “Nn, I’m going back to sleep.”

Cheng Qian said, puzzled, “Didn’t you come here to enjoy the cool? Just sleep here, it’s not like I’m fighting over the bed with you.”

“No... ahem, no need,” Yan Zhengming’s voice immediately felt dry as he carelessly threw out an excuse, “You... The pillow at your place is too hard, I’m not used to it, I’m leaving.”

After that, he didn’t even look at Cheng Qian and escaped quickly.

Cheng Qian raised his hand to summon the pillow and squeezed it for a bit. He could only feel that the Sect Leader had become more and more unreasonable — did he want to sleep in a pile of cotton?

Right then, a palm-sized little bird suddenly burst in like a firecracker and ran straight into Cheng Qian’s chest. The clear and sharp voice of a girl came out from the bird’s mouth, “Aiyo, Da... Eh? San-shixiong, Da-shixiong had given this courtyard to you?”

It was actually Shuikeng.

Before Cheng Qian could answer, the little bird jumped up, hopping around Cheng Qian’s arms three times with her feathers standing straight. “How infuriating! How infuriating! I can’t turn back!”

Cheng Qian never interacted much with girls, so he felt a bit uneasy facing his suddenly grown up Shimei. But now that she had turned into a bird, he was much more relaxed. “What’s wrong?”

“I met a bastard on the way, he had cast his greedy eyes on my beauty, and actually set a trap to catch me! I only managed to escape from that net after biting and struggling for an entire night. I don’t know what kind of shady spell was on that thing, but now I can’t turn back!” Shuikeng jumped again twice, as if venting her anger, “I’m going to burn that bastard to death!”

Cheng Qian raised his hand to hold her small bird head, feeling a handful of soft feathers. “Who was it?”

Shuikeng nudged against him sadly. “I don’t know.”

“I’ll take you to Er-shixiong, we’ll see if he has any solution,” Cheng Qian stood, “I heard that the misery of war is ceaseless outside, it would be best if you don’t go out alone in the future.”

Shuikeng lowered her head dejectedly. “When will I become a powerful great *yao*?”

These words were extremely familiar. Cheng Qian was reminded of his younger self, who had remained uneasy day and night, wondering when he would finally become a formidable master who could command the clouds and rain.

He couldn’t help smiling, about to comfort his Shimei.

But then he heard Shuikeng complain, extremely dissatisfied, “As soon as I turn into a bird, there are always people making advances on me, but why isn’t there even a single skirt-chaser trying to seduce me when I’m in my human form? Are those people blind? How infuriating!”

Cheng Qian, “...”

He felt like he might have misunderstood the reason his Shimei was angry.

[1] '*Horse King*' The word used here is , a deity in Taoism, said to have three eyes. Usually, telling someone that they don't know how many eyes the Horse King has serves to remind them how small and insignificant they actually are.

[2] '*nilin*' The word used here is . It refers to the scale that grows in the opposite direction on a dragon's body, usually under its throat. It is said that a dragon will enter a fit of rage if its nilin is touched. (This word was also used in chapter 52)

Li Yun had come close to stripping Shuikeng's skin off — that Yan Zhengming had even prepared salt and spices on the side, ready for a meal of roast bird — but he still couldn't figure out why she couldn't turn back.

It was evident that some men really were only good at shooting their mouths off. They seemed quite capable normally, but at crucial times, they would mess up.

Shuikeng attacked Li Yun until he ended up with a headful of feathers, exclaiming angrily, "What use is it having you around!"

After adequately losing her temper at her senior, she finally slumped down at the side, catching her breath. But then she recalled something, and with a wet sound, she spat out a sticky little note.

Yan Zhengming's expression immediately changed. He covered his face with his fan and took two steps back.

"I don't have a choice," Shuikeng said grumpily, "I don't have hands to hold it, I can't really keep it under my wing, can I?"

Yan Zhengming said in distaste, "Should I grab a carrier pigeon to show you how other birds do it?"

Shuikeng complained, "Have you ever seen a carrier pigeon tie a letter on its own leg? I didn't even get to meet Zhesi-dage, this thing was mixed

into a pile of bird feed, I only managed to pick it out with much effort. If it weren't for my keen eyes, I might've missed it entirely."

The words 'bird feed' successfully forced her Da-shixiong back another step.

But Cheng Qian nonchalantly picked up the piece of paper. After opening it, he only saw a line of tiny letters: *Successfully entered the Office of Heavenly Affairs, the hierarchy is strict in this place, unusually secretive. Practice caution on future encounters.*

Cheng Qian turned to Yan Zhengming in astonishment, "Da-shixiong..."

The fan in Yan Zhengming's hand still hid half of his face, maintaining the posture of a well-known courtesan who had no choice but to accept any advances despite internal feelings of refusal. But his eyes had sharpened as he spoke in a low voice, "In the eyes of outsiders, the Office of Heavenly Affairs is just a place for sectless rogue cultivators to lower their prides for a temporary title. But Zheshi had to spend more than thirty years to sneak in. There are truly too many unspeakable things about them."

He snapped his folding fan shut and held both hands behind his back, continuing, "The mortal world is full of trivial matters. Logically speaking, cultivators shouldn't involve themselves too much for the sake of their own cultivation, but I've always been wondering about something — for those high officials and noble lords of the common folk, after enjoying a life of luxury and wealth, won't they want to live forever and never grow old? Doesn't the emperor want to reign forever? I refuse to believe that everyone in the royal court would bend themselves to their tasks and exert themselves to the utmost without ever thinking of something like this. Otherwise, why would so many celestial artifacts be involved in a mere ordinary nobleman's rebellion?"

Shuikeng said, curiously, “What does that have to do with us?”

“Stupid bird,” Yan Zhengming poked her with the back of his folding fan, causing her to tumble over, “Due to some reasons that even we ourselves don’t know, the Office of Heavenly Affairs has probably been keeping track of us in their records for a long time. A hundred years ago, Zhou Hanzheng had known our roots very clearly. I definitely don’t want to meet a second Zhou Hanzheng, so I have no choice but to prepare in every way possible to make a preemptive strike.”

At some point, a faint murderous intent had appeared around him. Sometimes, the ups and downs of the mortal world were truly impossible to predict.

Cheng Qian’s chest abruptly ached. As more time passed after his departure from the icy lake, the human emotions in his heart also seemed like an icy river thawing out, slowly melting and recovering. At that moment, his heart finally started aching after such a long time.

He destroyed Zheshi’s note and patted Yan Zhengming’s back. “If I could kill the first Zhou Hanzheng, I could also kill a second one. Don’t worry.”

Yan Zhengming especially couldn’t *not* worry about him, so he turned to speak sternly, “You’d better behave yourself — you clearly know what Major and Minor Heavenly Tribulations are and still played dumb, I still haven’t settled that score with you, don’t think... Ah! Cheng Qian! You little bastard, what have you been touching earlier!”

The sect leader had been giving a completely solemn lecture, but when it occurred to him which hand Cheng Qian was using to touch him, his voice abruptly turned into a tragic scream.

With the innocent face of a proper gentleman, Cheng Qian raised his hand slightly, rubbing salt into the wound, “It’s just a little spit, it has long since dried.”

Yan Zhengming’s face twisted.

Cheng Qian had no choice but to sigh and comfort him, “Don’t be like this, Shixiong, your purity hasn’t been tainted.”

Yan Zhengming, “...”

At that moment, he truly understood the saying ‘Raising a dog is better than a Shidi’. The previous generations of the Fuyao Sect had been declining due to the sect allies killing each other, but it didn’t seem to be so illogical now.

Yan Zhengming wasn’t sure whether he should go back to scrub himself clean and change into clean clothes or settle his scores with Cheng Qian first. But suddenly, a series of footsteps came from outside.

The people in the room were stunned. The hint of a smile at the corners of Cheng Qian’s eyes disappeared instantly, his entire demeanor turning cold, as if he had just emerged from cold frost. Shuikeng also shut her mouth quickly and flew onto a penholder nearby, pretending to be an ordinary bird.

After a moment, an unknown young man ran up to the entrance, respectfully speaking up, “Young Master Cheng, there’s a letter for you.”

Yan Zhengming asked coldly, “When did the inner courtyard become a place for you all to enter as you please?”

Firstly, there were rules in the mountain village. Secondly, there were charms on the walls and entrance of the inner courtyard, outsiders shouldn't have been able to enter.

With a wave of Cheng Qian's hand, the letter floated toward him lightly. In the instant that the letter left the young man's hand, he seemed to have been struck awake with a club. He jolted violently, looked at the lord of the mountain village before him in fear, and fell to his knees when he met Yan Zhengming's gaze. He stuttered, trembling in fear, "Village... Village Lord, th-th-that letter has... has some kind of shady spell, this lowly one... this lowly one didn't mean to..."

Cheng Qian swept his eyes over the envelope. On it were the words 'To be unsealed by Cheng Xiaoyou', with 'Tang Zhen' as the inscribed sender.

The seal of the envelope had been torn open, a mild fragrance wafting from it. With a quick sniff, Cheng Qian could immediately tell that it was the sap of the Sleepwalking Grass. Tang Zhen had traveled all over the place these past years, and had experienced a great deal of strange things. Even Cheng Qian had gained quite a bit of new knowledge from being around him.

When the sap of Sleepwalking Grass was added to ink, if anyone other than the true intended recipient tried to open a letter while harboring malicious intent, they would receive backlash from it — for example, if someone had been lurking around outside their mountain village, trying to think of a way to enter the inner courtyard, then touching the Sleepwalking Grass would force them to present themselves.

Yan Zhengming reached out to grab that person. He was only testing him and didn't actually use much force, but the suspicious young man took him seriously and leapt up, nimbly dodging and running toward the outside.

But he had only reached the entrance when a person's figure landed in front of him. Shuangren's cold glare filled the air in front of the courtyard's entrance, instantly cutting off his escape.

"Were you allowed to leave?" Cheng Qian said in a low voice, "Stay."

The young man was about to make another move, but before he could even come close, he had been frightened by the heavy, pressuring aura that Cheng Qian had built through seven Major Heavenly Tribulations. His knees went weak and he immediately prostrated himself, blabbering, "Spare me, Senior, spare..."

But before he could finish begging for mercy, all of a sudden, that person's body violently went rigid as he opened his mouth toward the sky. His entire head tipped backward, split in two by his mouth, like a spoiled melon that had been cut open, with fine tendrils still connecting the split parts. Then a ball of smoke came out of his mouth, abruptly charging toward Cheng Qian.

Li Yun exclaimed, "Look out!"

Cheng Qian's gaze sharpened. Before the smoke could get within three steps of him, it had been frozen. In a manner that was very much like a person, it retreated and entered the young man's body again, covering his head. Within seconds, that person's head was reduced to bone, and the smoke dispersed in different directions.

With a light flick of Cheng Qian's sword tip, the skeleton was ground to dust. The young man became a headless corpse and soundlessly collapsed to the side.

"A demonic cultivator's technique," Cheng Qian said, "but it doesn't guarantee that it's a demonic cultivator's doing. Hadn't something like this happened in the past too?"

Yan Zhengming's expression became solemn. "That might not be it. We've never seen this person before. Logically speaking, the people going in and out of the mountain village are familiar faces whose roots we know clearly. We've been here for almost ten years, but have never really seen any cultivators."

Li Yun quickly reacted, "Could it be, someone had their eyes set on Xiao-Yuan and managed to track their way to us?"

The catalyst that had caused Han Yuan's fall into the demonic path was Zhou Hanzheng's Soul-Painting. It seemed to be yet another thing related to the Office of Heavenly Affairs.

Shuikeng immediately didn't dare to make another sound, thinking how fortunate it was that Zheshi hadn't met her.

Li Yun asked in a faint voice, "Da-shixiong, then... should we change places?"

When he spoke these words, his heart had been quite distraught. They had almost become too used to being cowardly dogs.

After a moment of silence, Yan Zhengming spoke, "We're not going anywhere."

Li Yun, "But..."

Yan Zhengming suddenly raised his brows and cut him off, "Can we keep hiding forever? I'd like to see for myself what these cowards could do to me, when they don't even dare to show themselves."

Then, with a wave of his sleeve, a loud sound came from the main entrance.

Cheng Qian's heart jumped. Shuangren immediately rose into the sky. In the air, he could see that a gigantic stone tablet had suddenly appeared at the main entrance. Countless people came after hearing the sound, fighting to get a look for themselves and pointing around. At some point, someone saw Cheng Qian, who was standing in the air on his sword, and the common folk in the mountain village immediately fell to their knees, each of them praying for the immortal's blessing.

Written on the stone tablet were the words: *Fuyao Mountain Village*.

Cheng Qian shook his head. For a moment, he couldn't figure out if his Dashixiong was acting impetuously or if he had always wanted to do this. He silently picked up Tang Zhen's letter for him and returned to the bamboo forest.

Tang Zhen's letter didn't really say anything important. It only explained that Mingming Valley had sent Liulang to him. After being possessed by Jiang Peng the demonic cultivator, his soul had been damaged. Fortunately, Cheng Qian's three bolts of icicles had nailed him in place. In the future, his path of cultivation would be much more difficult than others, but Tang Zhen would figure out a way for him.

For closure was a brief reminder that they shouldn't appear near Fuyao Mountain too much. There were too many people watching that place.

Cheng Qian's heart turned heavy. It felt like the road toward their return to Fuyao Mountain was so long that it was endless.

A few days later, after Yan Zhengming had thoroughly strengthened the circle of charms around the mountain village's perimeter, they followed their original plan and set out for Nanjiang. Their group was still made up of three people and a bird — the bird was peacefully perched on Li Yun's

head, so she could urge him to dawdle around less and figure out a way to turn her back as soon as possible.

The group had not traveled on their swords this time.

First of all, this trip to Nanjiang wasn't any sort of urgent business. Second of all, it was true that after spending many years in seclusion, cultivators also needed to occasionally enter the mortal world. There were the sayings, 'Calamity and fortune are closely related', 'The Dao and Tribulations go hand-in-hand'. Sometimes, dabbling in the mortal world for some time would be beneficial in breaking through a Trial — everyone understood this principle, and most cultivators who had just started cultivating would do this. But funnily enough, the more famous a formidable master was, the more they would seclude themselves.

As people advanced higher, their path would become narrower. The roc's long flight would one day become a scant single-log bridge, causing one to be on tenterhooks, fearing that they would misstep.

It seemed like the more powerful one grew, the more cowardly they would become. They didn't even dare to take the risk of falling down.

Fuyao Mountain Village was located in the Central Plains, a bit closer to the north. The scenery differed greatly from the south.

At the moment, the second month of summer had passed, the beginning of autumn was approaching. But the south was still sweltering and humid with the occasional rain. Long before they even came to the borders of Nanjiang, Li Yun had been distracted by the plentiful herbs in this place.

Every day, with a large hat on his head and a bamboo basket on his back, he would wander off into the forest deep inside the mountains like a vagrant physician. Occasionally, he'd have Shuikeng fight over some valuables with

those unintelligent little beasts, shamelessly flaunting his Shimei's power and prestige.

Li Yun claimed, with such beautiful words, that he was refining 'Anti-Poison Pills' in order to prevent them being affected by the miasma in Nanjiang.

But according to Cheng Qian's observation, seeing the amount he'd been collecting, they would've had enough herbs to eat as their three meals each day.

Yan Zhengming couldn't do anything about his questionable Er-shidi, so he could only act as if he didn't know him. Every day, he'd pretend to be an ordinary person and take Cheng Qian to wander around the town. This was truly a difficult thing to ask of him. Cheng Qian had always preferred peace and disliked noise since he was young. Moreover, he had secluded himself in a land of extreme cold for so long without encountering any kind of crowd, so having him brush shoulders with countless people every day was an indescribable torment for him.

But for whatever reason, Yan Zhengming was acting like an unweaned kitten constantly searching for its mother. If he lost sight of Cheng Qian for even a moment, he would kick up a fuss and make a scene. It was truly troublesome.

They wanted to find information on the Nightmare Walkers, so they stayed in a small town at the outskirts of Nanjiang. But even after most of the month had passed, they still couldn't find any trace of demonic cultivators there.

Could it be, these Nightmare Walkers usually behaved like the unmarried daughter of a noble house, 'never exiting the front gates, never stepping over the inner gates'?

Then these demonic cultivators... were quite similar to their Sect Leader.

Yan Zhengming had no fear of being robbed or showing off his wealth, and very openly reserved a few high-quality rooms at the only restaurant in town. For each meal, he never asked what they had available, only asking for them to serve the most expensive dishes. From the top of his head to the tips of his feet, not a single spot failed to express how much of a fop he was.

It was so rare to have such a spendthrift of a guest, that the owner of the shop practically worshipped him like his own ancestors. The customs of Nanjiang were quite intrepid, there wasn't much caution of distance between men and women, so the owner of the place had his daughter follow them everywhere, fearing that they'd fail to provide the utmost best service.

No matter how many variations there were with the flavor and fragrance of the delicacies they served, Cheng Qian still never touched his chopsticks. He would only sit silently on the side with a cup of cool water.

The young lady of the shop cautiously observed his expression and finally mustered up the courage to speak, "Is there anything that doesn't fit the Young Master's tastes?"

The difference in Cheng Qian's treatment of strangers and non-strangers was very apparent. In front of outsiders, he only ever showed polite dullness. If he had no intention of asking for information, he almost never took the initiative to talk to people, and looked very cold and aloof.

At the moment, Yan Zhengming was right next to him, so he was even less interested in dealing with others. He only said shortly, "No, many thanks."

The courage that the young lady had struggled to muster up was instantly swept clean. She didn't dare to provoke him again, so she turned to Yan

Zhengming, smiling courteously, “The two young masters have come at a bad time. If you had come a little later, the weather would’ve cooled some more, and there wouldn’t have been so many people everywhere.”

Yan Zhengming asked, “Why, is there some kind of scenic spot nearby to be seen at this time of the year?”

The young lady said, “That’s right. Not far ahead is the former site of Scarlet Bird Tower, they’re all coming for that.”

Yan Zhengming was stunned. “Scarlet Bird Tower? You’re talking about one of the Four Saints, Xu Yingzhi... ahem, Senior Xu Yingzhi?”

He only knew that Xu Yingzhi came from the south, but didn’t know the exact location of Scarlet Bird Tower. He never thought that they’d just happen to come across this place just like that.

The young lady hurriedly nodded. “Exactly. The Lord of Scarlet Bird Tower had passed away for more than a hundred years, only leaving behind some historical remains and a loyal old servant. At his deceased master’s behest, the old servant had kept the place in pristine condition, and it became a land with no master. Every year, on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, the doors would be opened to welcome fated people. Each year, people would come to try their luck. Even if they weren’t the so-called ‘fated people’ and couldn’t enter the Scarlet Bird Tower, if they happened to have caught the old servant’s eye, he might give them some pointers — hehe, but even though the Scarlet Bird Tower no longer had a master, it’s still not so easy to enter. The two young masters are clearly from wealthy backgrounds, it would be best to avoid interacting with those rogue cultivators. Once they start fighting for real, blood will be spilled. Even the official authorities wouldn’t be able to get involved.”

After staying for so long and still finding nothing about the Nightmare Walkers, they had originally wanted to stop wasting time here. But unexpectedly, they'd learned about the Scarlet Bird Tower of the Four Saints.

Could this be a blessing in the midst of misfortune?

At the same time, Yan Zhengming couldn't help harboring some misgivings in his heart. After he learned that the Lock of Earth might be related to the Four Saints, he had paid special attention to any rumors about them. But he had left Scarlet Bird Tower at the last place.

There was no other reason. The Lord of Scarlet Bird Tower, Xu Yingzhi, had died at Lord Beiming's hands.

For a moment, Yan Zhengming was uncertain about his next move.

Even though he didn't say it out loud, Cheng Qian had already figured out his concerns. Truth be told, Cheng Qian was quite good at reading people most of the time. He just rarely spoke up about it, and basically didn't take what he'd seen to heart.

Seeing his Da-shixiong's hesitation, Cheng Qian spoke up, "If you want to take a look at the tower, we'll meet up with Er-shixiong now."

Yan Zhengming stayed still. After quite a while, he suddenly spoke up about a completely irrelevant matter, "Even in his death, Shizu was still so concerned about the sect. He'd rather let his physical body die and his soul disperse, in exchange for sealing his three immortal souls in copper coins to prevent calamities for the sect — breaking through the Valley of Yao, destroying the Soul-Consuming Lamp... Moreover, even though he'd had a qi deviation, he didn't seem like a malicious person. If you were in Shifu's place, just by looking at these martial ties, would you make the painful decision of burying him under that tree?"

Cheng Qian paused. He didn't answer directly, asking back instead, "Then what about Xiao-Yuan? If we really were to catch him in Nanjiang, what do you plan to do?"

Yan Zhengming's brows were knitted tightly. He was silent again for another while.

No matter what path Han Yuan had chosen afterward, his action of killing Cheng Qian all those years ago had not been out of his own will. Those who had been affected by Soul-Painting wouldn't even notice their own bodies being reduced to smithereens, Han Yuan had no way of resisting. Yan Zhengming knew this very clearly — and yet, he still couldn't help bearing a grudge.

Right then, a small voice in his heart asked, *What if the situation had been reversed back then? What if the one that had been affected by Soul-Painting was Xiao-Qian?*

The moment this thought appeared, Yan Zhengming couldn't help being absorbed in his thoughts.

His gaze slowly turned to Cheng Qian — Cheng Qian's form wasn't too different from when he was a youth, he was just a little taller, his features and frame had grown a bit, but his general image was just like back then. Yet every time Yan Zhengming looked at him closely, he would get some kind of indescribable feeling.

At first, he had thought that it was the awkwardness caused by so many years apart. But then he realized that this wasn't it, because every time he closed his eyes, he'd wish he could recall every strand of Cheng Qian's eyelashes.

Logically speaking, wouldn't people normally ignore the familiar sights of things or people they knew well?

But Yan Zhengming found himself less and less able to look straight at Cheng Qian, because it felt like he would scorch his own eyes if he looked too much.

If it had been Xiao-Qian, I probably wouldn't even let him escape to the sea back then. After a long while, Yan Zhengming helplessly came to this conclusion. He internally sighed, a bit ashamed of himself, because he really was too partial.

As Yan Zhengming thought about these things, his gaze unavoidably turned a bit dazed. Cheng Qian was reminded of the way he'd looked back in the bamboo forest, with the xinmo mark in between his brows, and became a bit gloomy.

These things shouldn't have been of his concern to begin with, Cheng Qian thought to himself, *if he had faced any difficulties, he could've left them all to me, why would he make things so difficult for himself?*

Da-shixiong had been suffering for a hundred years, it really was more than enough. Cheng Qian decided to make it so Yan Zhengming could just idle away his time in pleasure from then on, occasionally putting on the airs of a sect leader, so he could just use his power as he liked — he himself had endured seven Major Heavenly Tribulations, would he be unable to shoulder the rundown Fuyao Sect?

“Let's go. Since the Lock of Earth is in the Sect Leader's Seal, we have to see the Scarlet Bird Tower no matter what.” Cheng Qian got to his feet as he spoke and reached out for Yan Zhengming.

For some unspeakable reasons, every time Cheng Qian's hand appeared in his sight, Yan Zhengming couldn't help turning nervous. So he subconsciously reached out to grab Cheng Qian's hand first.

Cheng Qian's fingertips were cold. Only the palm of his hand had some faint warmth, but it seemed scorching to Yan Zhengming.

Yan Zhengming shuddered unnoticeably, but couldn't bear to let go.

Cheng Qian paid no mind to this. With a click of his tongue, he grabbed the ‘Money-Hustling Young Master’'s hand, which had the copper coin ring, and roughly took the unsightly thing off, throwing it into his own sleeve. He sighed, “Come on, there’s nobody to slap you this time... Keeping an Imitation Spirit like this on your person, you must really have nothing better to do.”

Yan Zhengming’s hand was suddenly empty. For an instant, he felt the disappointment of losing something, but Cheng Qian had already started to leave the restaurant.

The cool sensation from earlier seemed to be lingering on his fingertips still. Yan Zhengming moved his finger a bit reluctantly. It felt like something was off about himself.

Could it be, the weather was too hot, so Cheng Qian’s cold hands could be used to repel the summer heat?

Cheng Qian had already walked out of the front door then. When he saw that Yan Zhengming was still dawdling behind, he turned back in puzzlement. “Shixiong, what are you doing?”

Yan Zhengming stammered, “I... uh, the weather is a bit hot...”

As he mumbled haltingly, he spurned himself. Xiao-Qian was no stranger, when they were younger, so many times he had rolled around in Yan Zhengming’s bed without showering after training with his sword. What was the worst that could happen if he were to say ‘come here and let me cool off’?

At most, he’d just get an eyeroll!

But Yan Zhengming couldn't speak those words no matter what. What's more, his heart was racing like an unbridled horse, his thoughts kept straying to weirder and weirder places. In his mind, he suddenly saw himself reaching out to hold Cheng Qian in his arms.

As if!

Yan Zhengming couldn't help shuddering internally. This was much too unusual. Could it be, the xinmo from back then hadn't disappeared even after so many days?

But soon afterward, some sort of hidden yearning appeared in his heart.

Truly capricious and bewildering.

Why the hell does this feel just like that saying 'A lovesick girl harboring amorous feelings'? For a moment, Yan Zhengming was rooted in place, as if he had been struck by lightning. After losing his mind for a long while, a weak voice in his heart finally let out a dying roar, *Good heavens, I must've given myself a side stitch from cultivating.*

Sect Leader Yan, who was losing his mind, left the town with Cheng Qian. They went along the mountain range to the spot where the spiritual energy was the richest, but before they could find Li Yun, they heard the chaotic voices of people.

From the distance, they could see an overelaborate flying horse carriage parked there. The carriage was bedecked with jewels, gauze curtains billowing. It felt as if a rain of flower petals was going to fall around it.

Flying horses weren't creatures that could be raised by just anyone. At the very least, only sects at the level of Mingming Valley could afford them. Moreover, most cultivators would be able to fly on other things after

reaching Concretion, and it wasn't uncommon for formidable masters to be able to teleport [1]. For someone to go out riding such a flashy flying horse carriage, if it wasn't due to their cultivation being so low that they couldn't fly on other things, it was purely for the purpose of showing off.

No matter what type of person they were, the cultivation level of the person in the carriage most definitely couldn't be that high.

The cover on top of the carriage was extremely thin, with gauze curtains carved full of charms hanging down. A young man was sitting in the carriage, lazily reclining to the side. Though it was true that he had fine features, something wasn't truly right. There was a red mole on top of his left eyebrow, adding some unspeakable air of hostility to him.

More than ten cultivators were following the carriage. At a glance, all of them seemed to have quite decent cultivation. In addition, there were two elders with completely white hair standing at both sides of the carriage's back. These men's clothes and sleeves were billowing freely in the air, and there was an otherworldly aura about them. They must be masters above the level of primordial spirit.

The person who was standing surrounded by these people, like a prey caught by a tiger, was none other than Li Yun, who looked like some kind of barefooted physician.

Li Yun was cunning, but he was too easily distracted and his mind was always filled with mischievous ideas, which were disadvantageous for cultivating. When he was younger, there was still Cheng Qian to inspire him, but then he started slacking off with Yan Zhengming and instead diverted his focus to those shady practices he liked so much. All these years, his performance regarding his cultivation had always been mediocre, not particularly improving or declining. He had been stuck on the threshold

of almost forming his own primordial spirit for decades with no progress, but he wasn't worried at all.

Shuikeng was hovering above his head, the feathers on her body all fluffed up as she shouted curses at the young man in the carriage, "Who's a bird? Your mouth sticks out and your chin is like an ape's, you're the bird! Even if I really were a bird, I'm raised by someone else. Bringing in all these daddies of yours to snatch other people's belongings by force, how shameless!"

The young man in the carriage didn't seem to have a good temper, but he was clearly treating Shuikeng like a little bird who could spew insolent words. Even after being cursed like that, he didn't lower himself to her level and instead found her amusing. He spoke to Li Yun, grinning, "From what I can tell, this fellow cultivator treads the path of pills, right? I heard that the path of pills requires a lot of focus and can't bear any disturbance, aren't you bothered by the noise, carrying that thing around? Moreover, the path of pills is quite difficult, the herbs thrown in the furnace are priceless resources, this fellow cultivator... hmm, often suffers shame from your purse, don't you."

Even though Li Yun unmistakably had the face of a pretty boy, he was quite slovenly in dress and manner. Furthermore, he had been roaming around the wilderness of Nanjiang for a long time. At the moment, he was carrying a worn-out basket on his back, his pants were rolled up his legs, and he had somehow gotten specks of mud all over himself. This was unmistakably quite a shabby look.

"I'll give you a thousand taels of gold and three almighty charms," said the fop in the carriage, "The time for Scarlet Bird Tower's doors being opened is fast approaching, quite a lot of cultivators have gathered here. If you need any resources, having those three almighty charms would be enough to trade for good things with those people — sell this bird to me."

Li Yun stayed silent hearing this. It seemed as if he had really been moved by the price.

Shuikeng immediately started panicking. This Er-shixiong of hers was cowardly and had no principle, he might really do something like selling her off. She instantly started kicking up a storm on his head, “You dare! If you dare sell me off, the sect leader will break your legs!”

Each fop was different in his own way. If it was Da-shixiong’s type, even though he was only good at lazing around, you could still reason with him most of the time.

But the one in the carriage was different. Even though he was also capable of faking a cordial front, in reality, he’d had his underlings surround Li Yun unambiguously, fully prepared whether he had to buy or rob from him.

Li Yun’s eyes turned slightly as he thought to himself, *Troublesome*.

He reached out to grab the chirping Shuikeng-bird and whispered, “Shimei, how about I sell you off first, then return to get reinforcements and take you back?”

He wasn’t too worried about Shuikeng. Shuikeng wasn’t very bright, but she was very aware of her own capabilities and knew when to stop herself — for example, when Da-shixiong wasn’t around and she realized that she had no support, she wouldn’t actively offend others.

Shuikeng mercilessly bit him. Li Yun thought aloud with a sour face, “Come on, you’re not even worth a thousand taels of gold... ah, forget it, I’m your Shixiong after all.”

He pinched Shuikeng’s beak, preventing her from making another sound, and put on a torn face as he cupped his hand in greeting, “Young Master,

you've offered a very generous price, but you've also seen the way this little creature of mine is. She has a bad temper and is difficult to take care of, if she were to offend Young Master... ah, no matter what, she's still a living being."

The young master in the carriage saw how reluctant he was to part with the bird, and a hint of impatience flashed on his face. It seemed like he had no plans to keep wasting time with Li Yun, so he urged, "If I had spent so much money to buy it, naturally I would take care of it well. Just state whether you're selling it."

But before he could finish his words, Shuikeng seemed to have seen something. She abruptly shook Li Yun's hand off and burst out of the crowd.

One of the cultivators saw this and immediately reached out to strike her down, but a bolt of energy had broken through the air.

Right then, the cultivator suddenly felt chills on his back. Immediately afterward, a bolt of sword energy accurately sliced down. The sword wielder seemed to scorn sneak attacks and didn't harm him, only breaking off his attack. Then the sword aura dispersed, and a chill that defeated even the intense heat of summer spread in the surrounding area.

Everyone abruptly turned and saw two people approaching from the distance. It seemed as if they had arrived right in front of them in an instant. The two older men following the carriage immediately turned serious, stepping out of the crowd to speak, fully alert, "Where are these two fellow cultivators going?"

Even before Shuikeng could speak, she'd had the inborn gift of finding the most reliable person whenever anything happened. She burst straight into Cheng Qian's hand, completely dropping her earlier impression of a fierce

shrew cussing up the street, and pitifully started pouring out her woes, “That person is the one who had thrown a net on me on my way, causing me to be like this. Now he has stubbornly chased me here, then that tramp named Li had been blinded by riches, and was about to sell me off!”

The ‘tramp’ named Li, “...”

Cheng Qian reached out to cradle Shuikeng’s head, swept his eyes over the person in the carriage, and turned to the two old men in front of it.

Right when Li Yun was worrying that he would make insolent remarks, he saw Cheng Qian give these people a slight nod. Even though it wasn’t exactly a greeting full of smiles, he was still quite courteous.

“Many thanks for this fellow cultivator’s good graces and appreciation toward this little sparrow of ours,” Cheng Qian said unhurriedly, “But she has been by our side for so long and is quite intelligent, she’s just like a part of the family, and we’ve never treated her as a pet. We are unable to sell her, please forgive us.”

Yan Zhengming stayed silent next to him, examining every inch of the visually very expensive carriage. He internally decided that he would get some flying horses to raise after they returned to the mountain village. Even if they weren’t of much use, they were still good for showing off.

Cheng Qian was once someone who would break into a fight at any disagreement, but that didn’t mean he was belligerent. He simply didn’t have much choice.

Now, his cultivation was enough to run wild all across the lands. Added with Shuangren in his hands, he had long since become fearless, but he became more courteous toward others instead. His words weren’t decorated with the slightest flattery, but also didn’t carry any haughtiness. His tone

was quite mild, but as he spoke, his hands were always holding the talkative bird carefully. All of this showed a sensible sincerity.

The young man in the carriage looked down on Cheng Qian, frowning. “You’re also here to try your luck at Scarlet Bird Tower?”

Cheng Qian could tell with one glance that this person’s level was probably still stuck on the verge of Concretion. He thought, *Do you have any means to care?*

But he didn’t really want to cause additional problems, so he replied, “We’re going to Nanjiang and just happened to pass this place. If we could admire the grace of Scarlet Bird Tower on our way, it would be an unexpected gain.”

Seeing how the young man couldn’t tell that he was being treated leniently, one of the seniors in front of the carriages couldn’t help turning around to warn him in a low voice.

Yet, even though they couldn’t hear the old man’s words, as soon as he spoke, the young man became agitated before he could even finish. He pointed at the old cultivator, “It’s useless for my family to raise you people. All of you have so many misgivings even when you’re just facing some rogue cultivators — I want that bird no matter what!”

The old cultivator had quite a few years on him and was a master in his own right, if he were to go anywhere, would anyone fail to fall all over themselves flattering him? But at the moment, he was being yelled at by some ignorant youth in public, and his expression immediately turned sour.

Yan Zhengming dragged Shuikeng out of Cheng Qian’s hand, where she was enjoying the cool in the midst of summer, and finally felt more at ease.

Then he had the leisure to sigh with emotion, speaking in a low voice, “How rare it is to find a bigger bastard than me.”

He was so self-aware, that the others simply couldn’t say anything to add to his words.

After that, Yan Zhengming made a sign to Li Yun. “We already said we’re not selling her — Shidi, let’s go.”

Then, he didn’t even bother riding his sword. His energy just turned into the figure of a sword, carrying him straight to the skies, the sword aura around him completely exposed.

The two older men exchanged a helpless look, expressions fully alert — there were thousands upon thousands of cultivators who used swords, but not all of them could be called sword cultivators. Sword cultivators could turn their own primordial spirits into swords. When released outside their own bodies, it was hard to tell them apart from real swords.

Cultivating a primordial spirit sword was extremely hard, it required the right timing, favorable geographical and social conditions, and at least a hundred years’ effort. The person in front of them was so young, but he had already achieved something like this. His future must be beyond imagination.

Sword cultivators were rare to begin with, so the ones with some achievement usually considered themselves the best in the world. For someone of Yan Zhengming’s level to still be willing to talk normally with his juniors was already a show of great courtesy. But this young master of theirs, who couldn’t even fly on a sword, was born a fool and even felt that he was being slighted. He immediately exclaimed in rage, “Since you’re all so useless, I’ll take care of things myself.”

Before the two old men could stop him, a small banner flew out of the young man's sleeve. The brightly colored charms on it made it look like a spirit-summoning banner. It seemed to be some kind of treasured artifact that didn't have any requirements for the activator's cultivation. In an instant, it had absorbed the surroundings and turned it into an isolated dimension!

[1] '*teleport*' The word used here is *tele*, which is literally something along the lines of 'shrinking the earth a thousand *li*'. Basically it's some sort of ability that allows people to cover great distances in an instant.

Yan Zhengming could crush the idiot in the carriage with a single finger. As for the two hatchet men whose integrity had to suffer in their sunset years, even though they seemed quite capable, they actually weren't worthy of much attention.

The two of them were visibly quite old. For cultivators, if their cultivation could keep up with their age — assuming they didn't have any unusual preferences — they would usually keep their appearance at the peak of their youth, like Island Lord Gu or Lord Beiming. Showing signs of aging meant that even though their life force had come to their limit, their cultivation hadn't progressed, like the Master of Xixing Palace, Bai Ji. Usually, these people had been stuck in the same place for too long, unable to break through that threshold in their cultivation, which signified the limit of their abilities.

Moreover, saying 'Primordial Spirit Cultivators' only referred to the level of their cultivation. There were thousands of paths in the Great Dao, all of which led to the same goal. Cultivation levels were also divided into many types, and a high level of cultivation didn't necessarily imply good fighting skills. For example, someone like Li Yun, who had mediocre sword skills and always spent his time around a furnace, even if he were to cultivate three primordial spirits in the future, Yan Zhengming could still beat him to a pulp.

This was also the reason nobody wanted to provoke sword cultivators — from the day they entered the Dao, they lived for the sake of combat.

Fortunately, Yan Zhengming wasn't really a sword cultivator in the common sense. Before he became a sword cultivator, he had first gotten used to being the young master of a wealthy family. After becoming a sword cultivator, he was shoved into the position of sect leader like a herded duck. He didn't have the slightest intention of causing unneeded trouble, but whether inside or outside the sect... and Cheng Qian, there were so many things to burden him with worries, so he really didn't want to waste any additional effort on these trivial things.

These people were nothing to worry about, but that fop could go around in a flying horse carriage and still had people serving his every need despite being so useless. What's more, he could even order primordial spirit cultivators around as he liked. He might've been the direct successor of some powerful sect. When you beat a dog, you must answer to its master. If they were to add another enemy to the already rundown Fuyao Mountain Village for this stupid business, it wouldn't be very worthwhile.

Unfortunately, things didn't go according to their wishes. They hadn't checked the almanac before going out today, so they'd encountered some impulsive fool.

As soon as the strange banner left the fop's hand, it immediately escaped its original master's control. Strong winds and fierce rain swept over the place, instantly suppressing the aura of everyone in the area. Some sort of ancient oppressive aura could be felt, vaguely.

Li Yun didn't even care about getting out of the way. His eyes lit up, like a hunter spotting a priceless prey, "Heavens... This, is this the legendary 'Great Dragon's Banner'?"

Even without anyone asking him, Li Yun rattled on by himself, "This is an ancient artifact, it's even older than San-shidi's Sword of Miserable Death. It's said to be painted on the skin of a Great Dragon [1] from overseas, the

flagpole is a dragon's bone. It carries the power of an ancient celestial dragon, a Great Dragon! As the dragon roars on the deep blue sea, even the sun, the moon, and the stars would have to quake in the face of its might. It's said that this thing is so powerful it could blot out the sky and the sun, move the mountains and fill up the seas, all at the command of one person..."

Yan Zhengming's head hurt hearing those ramblings, so he exclaimed with a stony face, "Shut up!"

Then he shoved Shuikeng toward Li Yun and turned to the two old men. "We're not the ones looking for trouble."

The old men exchanged a look, both of them extremely helpless. With no other choice, one of them went to stop the fop in the carriage while the other one started making peace with Yan Zhengming, "Fellow cultivator, I believe you're a magnanimous person. Our young master is the only son and heir, he's young and pampered, so it's unavoidable that he is a bit arrogant and wilful, uh... If this bird is truly so valuable, we can actually still discuss the price..."

The first half still sounded reasonable, but the latter half made Sect Leader Yan lose his temper right on the spot.

When he was younger, he had also been extremely wealthy and spent money like water. But then the Yan house was gone and they couldn't return to their sect, so he had experienced some difficult times due to a constant shortage of money, causing him to become the 'Money-Hustling Young Master' who valued money more than his own life. After experiencing so many ups and downs, Yan Zhengming's feelings toward the words 'riches and honor' were extremely complicated.

Put simply, he himself could show off, but he couldn't stand other people showing off. Especially other people showing off to him with their money.

He exclaimed in fury, "We already said we're not selling her! Don't you understand?"

Then he came to the end of his patience and struck at the Great Dragon's Banner.

The Great Dragon's Banner still held the soul of the dragon. Once it was released, even if the holder was an ordinary person, they could still shake the heavens and the earth — it was obvious how much this braindead fop's family spoiled him. At this moment, the Dragon's Banner was agitated by Yan Zhengming's sword aura. In an instant, tens of lightning strikes descended, clashing against the surly sword aura in the air. The loud sounds of explosion caused the others' vision and hearing to dim.

Yan Zhengming's expression shifted slightly as he was forced back a few steps. He could faintly feel his own energy being suppressed by the might of the dragon.

Right then, he heard the sound of a sharp weapon being unsheathed behind him. A chill that had become familiar in recent days gradually spread out as Cheng Qian spoke next to him, "I've been in seclusion for too long, so my knowledge and experience are still lacking. I've never encountered a Great Dragon's soul until now. Shixiong, let me exchange blows with it."

Yan Zhengming was stunned at first, but then the anger in his chest burned more furiously as he thought, *This kid used to just charge forward without even discussing with me, now when did he learn to do this? Could it be, in the past years, my image in his heart had changed from 'good-for-nothing Da-shixiong' to 'good-for-nothing Da-shixiong who needs to be coddled'?*

He'd had no qualms challenging the consciousness that had been accumulated from many generations of formidable masters, would he be afraid of some horned serpent which had been dead for eight thousand years?

Without a word, Yan Zhengming's entire person immediately turned into a bright, blinding sword figure. Thousands of primordial spirit swords met the lightning strikes in the air without fail, going up against the forces. The sword aura and the lightning clashed furiously, even the earth was trembling as the beasts fled in fear. Amid the clouds, the vague figure of the celestial dragon from overseas clashed with the unbridled, most powerful sword cultivator of the generation, neither of them backing off. The thick clouds churned like the waves of the sea.

The fop in the carriage had been scared stupid. Each time he unleashed the Great Dragon's Banner, the other party would've basically surrendered already. Who would've thought that the damned banner would escape his control upon encountering a powerful opponent and cause such a great disturbance? At the moment, he was completely relying on the two primordial spirit cultivators for protection. The wind and rain caused by the Great Dragon's Banner had drenched him thoroughly, so he could only sit there trembling, cheeks numb from his chattering teeth.

Other than the two primordial spirit cultivators, the unfortunate souls around the carriage had basically been paralyzed by the sword aura and the might of the dragon, so they couldn't even raise their faces.

Cheng Qian, who had been left to observe the battle, stood still in place, but there were some hints of awkwardness on his face. For a moment, he couldn't figure out what he had said wrong this time.

Upon seeing this scene, Shuikeng hurriedly buried her face back in Ershixiong's sleeve. She wisely decided to behave herself for now, determined

not to argue with the sect leader.

Was Da-shixiong experiencing those few days of the month which cause great suffering? What a temper.

The dragon raised its face and let out a long howl. Yan Zhengming pushed himself to his limit, completely disregarding the wind slicing around him. His wide sleeves were torn, the belt of his robes fluttered in the wind. Countless primordial spirit swords joined into one, carrying the power of the wind and lightning, and ruthlessly tore through the clouds. The powerful winds and rain couldn't weaken the blow as it struck straight toward the dragon soul.

Cheng Qian's eyes sharpened as he spoke in a low voice, "‘Point-break’... Da-shixiong has reached this level?"

It was said that ‘Point-break’ for sword cultivators was the first step to cultivating their body as their sword. When sword cultivators reach this level, they would truly come in contact with the territory of sword gods, which could never be described to outsiders.

As soon as they crossed the threshold of this level, they would be considered some of the most powerful cultivators.

"As far as I know, last time he drew his sword, he was still one step short," Li Yun gave him a meaningful look, "I think it was forced by you."

Cheng Qian was stunned speechless by those words. He instinctively wanted to refute, but when he thought about it, that really seemed to be the case.

His expression turned gloomy for a moment as he pondered, "Then... Could it be, the xinmo mark in between his brows also has something to do

with me?”

Right then, a furious howl was heard. Yan Zhengming’s sword had penetrated the dragon soul’s body.

Li Yun immediately yelled, “Aiyo, Da-shixiong, that’s a Great Dragon’s Banner, it’s the only one in existence, don’t lay waste to such a priceless treasure... Dear mother, the dragon bone is cracking, go easy on it!”

Yan Zhengming refused to listen. It seemed like he had made up his mind to beat the Dragon Banner and soul straight back into the nether world.

Li Yun could only look at Cheng Qian helplessly.

Cheng Qian stayed still and silent so Li Yun spoke up, “Xiao-Qian, ever since ancient times, dead people could never come back to life, but you’re an exception. You probably couldn’t feel the fear and remorse that comes with death. Those emotions are much too heavy, they could cause a person to experience great turmoil and completely change their views of the world. Looking back upon the last hundred years, how could everything possibly go back to the way it used to be so easily? I can’t even count how many years he had loathed himself because of you... so don’t let his loathing persist.”

Cheng Qian seemed cold outside, but his mind was sharp and quick. He had always been able to grasp the implications behind explicit statements, so how could he not understand what Li Yun meant?

Following the sword of Point-break, the circumstances in the air seemed to have turned. The dragon soul, which had been overbearingly powerful earlier, was currently being forced back. Now, Yan Zhengming was the one beating it up. At last, the dragon couldn’t take it anymore and went around to return to the banner.

Right then, Cheng Qian suddenly burst into the sky. Amid the wind and lightning strikes, the raindrops that fell around his body all turned to frost. The primordial spirit cultivated in the Spirit-Condensing Jade through many hazards suddenly unleashed its power, accurately striking when the dragon soul was about to return to the Great Dragon's Banner.

The wounded dragon soul was suppressed by Cheng Qian's primordial spirit and remained suspended in the air.

The tip of Yan Zhengming's sword had already touched the Great Dragon's Banner, but he forcibly halted himself. The murderous intent on his face still remained as he looked at Cheng Qian silently.

Cheng Qian gave him an unbothered smile and said, "Look, Er-shixiong is turning blue. He has specifically sent me here to plead with you, so Da-shixiong, show some mercy."

How infuriating, Yan Zhengming thought to himself, but he could never stay angry in the face of Cheng Qian's rare smile. The cold murderous intent on his body and the faint xinmo mark in between his brows finally started fading, but the aura of Point-break still remained. He was starting to enter the territory of sword gods, but not only did he not feel enlightened, he instead ridiculed himself, *Seems like I've let him easily persuade me again, how embarrassing.*

Yan Zhengming withdrew the sword aura around himself and rolled his eyes at Cheng Qian. "Anything he finds, he would want. Li Yun is only good at picking up scraps."

With a wave of Cheng Qian's sleeve, the dragon soul suspended in the air was returned to the Great Dragon's Banner. The banner drooped down limply, the winds and lightning filling the air also stopping instantly. It was as if the earlier happenings had been an illusion. Cheng Qian unhurriedly

rolled up the Dragon's Banner, fingers brushing against the dragon bone that Yan Zhengming had cracked. He could feel the faint trembling of the dragon soul within.

It was one of the most powerful celestial beasts after all. For it to fall to this point, one couldn't even be sure if they should say it was because the will of Heaven was unpredictable.

The world was merciless, and all things on earth were its playthings.

Maybe in front of the heavenly law, celestial beasts and formidable masters were just a bunch of ants?

Thinking of it this way was really both mind-opening and saddening.

Cheng Qian tossed the Great Dragon's Banner to Li Yun and swept his eyes over the flying horse carriage on the ground — the flying horses had broken free from the reins to escape at some point. How was this fop going to go home, make those lackeys of his carry him as they fly on their swords?

Yan Zhengming spoke up haughtily, "Since you all seem inclined to reconcile peacefully, we will accept this gift."

Li Yun was smiling happily on the side, echoing those words like some kind of henchman, "Yes, yes, many thanks, many thanks."

The two primordial spirit cultivators from the other party could see clearly — the sword cultivator had passed the level of Point-break, the one who wasn't a sword cultivator had suppressed the dragon soul with his primordial spirit through brute force. Though with the dragon soul, it felt like they were taking advantage of another's difficulty... that thing was still an ancient Great Dragon after all.

How could they insult such people so easily? Even if they had to suffer some losses, they had to endure it.

One of the old primordial spirit cultivators kowtowed as he asked, “Might I ask, which sect do these fellow cultivators come from?”

Upon hearing this, Shuikeng quickly poked her head out of Li Yun’s sleeve to cut in, “Why should we tell you? So you people can find us more easily to take revenge?”

The old man couldn’t find the words to reply. His expression was extremely awkward.

Any other day, Shuikeng would never have dared to speak to a primordial spirit cultivator this way. But at the moment, most of her Shixiong were present, so she had the rare opportunity to speak out like this. She had almost gotten carried away with herself, so she flew off toward Cheng Qian — being next to her little Shixiong was still the safest after all. In this regard, even Da-shixiong couldn’t compare to him.

Unexpectedly, she was caught by a thin thread on her way. A long, thin thread had appeared from the tip of Yan Zhengming’s finger at some point, which had tied itself around Shuikeng’s foot. “Noisy.”

Sect Leader Yan then dragged his little Shimei behind him like a kite, and turned to leave just like that.

On this dangerous encounter, Li Yun might have been called ‘the tramp named Li’, but he now had the Great Dragon’s Banner in his possession. He was so happy that he looked like a poor scholar who had found a large gold ingot. Caressing the cracked dragon bone, he couldn’t restrain his own joy as he sighed emotionally, “My Xiao-Qian, ah...”

Before Cheng Qian could make a sound, Yan Zhengming had cut in furiously, “Who’s yours?”

As soon as those words left his mouth, Li Yun, Shuikeng, and Cheng Qian all turned to look at him simultaneously. Li Yun said teasingly, “Da-shixiong, are you striving to be the favorite?”

Yan Zhengming, “...”

Li Yun quickly yielded under the Sect Leader’s abuse of power and ran off to hide in fear.

Yan Zhengming kept a straight face, as if trying to regain his prestige, and told Cheng Qian solemnly, “We’re going to the Scarlet Bird Tower immediately, we’re not waiting until the fifteenth day of the eighth month. There would’ve been many people then, it might even cause additional problems... What are you looking at, don’t look!”

Cheng Qian immediately lowered his face in acceptance — if he weren’t smiling, it would’ve looked more sincere.

Yan Zhengming realized in a panic that his dignity was beyond salvation, so he indignantly left Cheng Qian far behind, walking ahead of the group by himself.

After their departure, the fop in the carriage realized that not only had his face been completely trashed, his Great Dragon’s Banner had also been snatched away, and was extremely furious.

This person was also a prime example of ‘once the wound heals, the pain is also forgotten’. In the blink of an eye, he completely forgot how he had trembled in fear behind the two primordial spirit cultivators earlier. Without

any feelings of respect, he pushed the two seniors aside and started cursing at them, “Useless! All of you are useless! If my father learns about this...”

The two older cultivators each sighed to themselves. One of them said, “Young Master, calm your anger. This place is close to Scarlet Bird Tower, please be mindful of your words. If other people were to hear of our origins, it might cause a disturbance.”

“Scram! You can’t even deal with some rogue cultivators from some unknown place, what use is it for my father to raise you people!” As the fop spoke, he dropped himself onto the carriage. After sweeping his eyes over the place, he pointed at two wobbly-looking cultivators and said, “You’ve let my horses run off, so you’ll be the horses to pull my carriage! I must get that talking bird, don’t let me see those people again!”

It seemed like humiliating people was a regular occurrence with this fop. He was ordering two cultivators above the level of Concretion to pull his horse, but nobody directly spoke up against him. The appointed cultivators only stood, respectfully admonishing him in well-meant words.

Right then, a small snake about as broad as a thumb emerged from the woods not far behind them. Its entire body was almost black, difficult to distinguish from the dirt around it. It calmly slithered forward, approaching the carriage stealthily. The cultivators were being ordered around by the fop, so nobody had noticed the snake.

The little snake opened its mouth slightly, flicking a purple tongue that was so dark it seemed black. And then its black body disappeared in the air, sinking into the center of the fop’s back.

A cultivator next to the fop had been urging him earnestly that he shouldn’t cause too much trouble when he went out, and saw the furious fop suddenly

go still. As if he had been moved by some outsider's words, he quickly settled down.

That cultivator thought that his words had been effective, so he immediately pushed forward on his success by toadying up to him, "Even if we disregard Young Master's other points, your ability to understand this cardinal principle is already admirable. It's fine that the horses are gone, we'll pull the carriage for you, okay?"

The fop gave him a look. He seemed to be pondering something. Then he lowered his eyes and uncharacteristically stayed silent, turning around to get back onto the carriage.

As long as this young master didn't act up, the surrounding people could relax. Nobody had spared any thoughts to wonder why he was suddenly so agreeable.

The fop drew the curtain's carriage and looked down on his own hand, which had never seen the slightest labor. In his eyes, a dark aura swirled. After a moment, he showed a twisted smile.

[1] 'Great Dragon' The phrase used here is 真龍, which literally means 'True Dragon'. The word for 'true' commonly means 'real; genuine', but it can also mean 'origin' (see the fifth form of Fuyao Wooden Swordplay, Return to Trueness (返真), which is basically 'return to original purity and simplicity'). In this context, 'True Dragon' is more like 'Original Dragon', so we decided to use 'Great Dragon'.

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The Scarlet Bird Tower was located on a steep cliff, overlooking a great abyss. Looking downward from that height, there was a large deep pond. Its color was almost black and it was tranquil as dark jade.

The Scarlet Bird was born amid flames in the south. Burning brilliantly, it was the lord of the birds.

From the rumors, this place should have been a glorious pagoda. But when they came close, they realized that it was just a dull, small tower. Because the south was always humid and hot, motley moss had started growing on the outer wall. The cinnabar covering the pinnacle of the tower was peeling, like the dismal grey of exhausted luxury, floating on top of a dead end, splendid yet desolate.

Outside the Scarlet Bird Tower was a circle of half-ruined courtyard wall, the red clay and green bricks scattered about the place. Unattended wild grass had grown as tall as a house, occasionally swaying in the wind.

Within a three *li* radius of this place, there wasn't the faintest trace of humans.

Yan Zhengming and the others had gotten their information a little late. At the moment, there were still three days to the fifteenth day of the eighth month. They had originally intended to avoid the crowd, yet who would've thought that when they arrived, the place was already so packed with people that brushing shoulders was unavoidable.

But nobody from this large crowd of cultivators could come close, because there was a menacing fiery aura surrounding the tower, as if an invisible beast was guarding the place. Occasionally, invisible flames would be spewed, churning around the perimeter. If anyone dared to enter, they would be greeted with flames.

The cultivators all gathered beyond three *li* of Scarlet Bird Tower, surrounding the place until movement was impossible.

All of them were anticipating some kind of mystery treasure and good fortune inside. If they could somehow enter through pure dumb luck, maybe they could use this opportunity to immediately make immense progress.

The ones who had some resources all brought artifacts that allowed them to rest within, while the poor wretches only had the sky as their tent and the earth as their mat. It was so crowded that it seemed like the common folk's fair. Some clever locals brought food to peddle to the cultivators who hadn't achieved inedia — but the local customs in this place were quite simple and unsophisticated, the people were generally not as hardworking as those near the East Sea, so the peddlers had no real order.

Li Yun looked around and suggested, “Da-shixiong, since so many people had come here, I think being anxious would be useless. Let's rest for the night first. You just broke through the level of Point-break, you need to consolidate yourself. I also need to figure out how to turn Shimei back, she attracts more attention as a bird than as a person.”

Yan Zhengming made a sound in response. He dug in his bosom, procuring a stone the size of a dove's egg. This thing looked like the stone of an ornamental ring, but there was a lifelike small courtyard within it.

The small stone started growing in his hand, becoming more invisible as it grew, and finally became a real courtyard, enveloping the group within it,

separated from the surroundings — there was a small secluded dimension in the stone.

In the courtyard, the rockery and landscape were fully formed. There were a few small houses forming a circle, with a small, delicate swing in the middle.

Standing within, one would immediately feel the heat of summer being swept away. It was extremely refreshing. As soon as this artifact was unleashed, it attracted the stupefied eyes of the surrounding people.

“Stone Seed,” Li Yun paced a few steps, reached out to feel the swing’s prop, and sighed with an air of self-satisfaction, “Money-Hustling Young Master, you’ve been smuggling things on the surface these past years, but you’ve secretly been collecting quite a few good stuff too.”

Yan Zhengming shot at him, “Should we have expected you to support the family? We would’ve starved to death before reaching inedia.”

Then he turned his eyes outside the Stone Seed. Probably because the sword aura of ‘Point-break’ was still lingering on him, Yan Zhengming’s gaze was sharp as a blade, instantly sweeping away the prying looks around them.

All those years ago on the East Sea and Azure Dragon Island, he had been thoughtless and placed too much importance on luxury, always going against Shifu’s words. He’d insisted on taking a large ship, attracting the unsavory attention of others. He had been so immensely triumphant too, thinking that he was doing a great job showing off, without any idea how much envy and hate he had caused or the sufferings that he would attract.

If it had been today, even if he were to take a ship made of pure gold and silver, would anyone dare to say anything to his face?

But Yan Zhengming didn't feel any pride, there was only sorrow in his heart.

From the ancient times, people's hearts had always been sinister and vicious, arousing envy at the sight of other people's fortune — with his current abilities, he might be able to brazenly show off his luxury for a bit, but he still couldn't undo the Mountain-Sealing Decree.

But even just to arrive at this point, he had already felt physically and mentally exhausted. Maybe he didn't have the capabilities to begin with.

In this world, what caused the deepest pain were the words 'powerless to act'. Yan Zhengming had been carrying these words for so many years that it almost felt like a crown. Fortunately, he was naturally more broad-minded than others, otherwise he would've fallen under the pressure.

Could it be, the reason Shifu had passed the Sect Leader's Seal to him back then was because he had seen this good point of his?

When he thought of this, Yan Zhengming felt more enlightened, albeit a bit self-deprecatingly.

"We'll rest here for now," Yan Zhengming said, turning around to Cheng Qian, "This place is much cooler, right?"

Cheng Qian was stunned, unable to speak for a moment. His body was forged in an icy lake, of course it couldn't stand heat. But due to his unique constitution, he couldn't really sweat, and he never spoke up about the matter, so he thought that other people wouldn't be able to tell. He never expected that Da-shixiong had always paid attention to this.

When Yan Zhengming saw his stunned look, as if clueless how to respond, he couldn't help sighing and reaching out to touch Cheng Qian's nape.

“Come stand guard for me, I’m consolidating my cultivation.”

For a sword cultivator, ‘Point-break’ wasn’t a simple increase in cultivation level, it was more like opening a new world. Yan Zhengming thoroughly explored his new cultivation level, only waking from his meditation after a long time. When he opened his eyes, he saw that Cheng Qian had dutifully guarded him on the side.

Even Li Yun and Shuikeng were there — but the two of them had almost fallen asleep.

Yan Zhengming cleared his throat lightly. “Why are you all crowded at my place?”

Li Yun was woken by his cough. Drowsiness still remained on his face, but he had already blurted out, “Da-shixiong, how does it feel to enter the level of ‘Point-break’?”

He wasn’t the only one, all of them were actually very curious — other than true sword cultivators, nobody could enter the level of ‘Point-break’ no matter how powerful they were. In the entire Fuyao Sect, including Han Yuan, this sect leader of theirs was the only one who had entered the Dao through the sword.

Even Cheng Qian had straightened up a bit.

Yan Zhengming hesitated for a while, and spoke carefully at last, “The heavens and the earth were extremely vast.”

Those words were extremely sloppy, it was no different from saying nothing. Only Cheng Qian, who had practiced Tide Swordplay, could grasp a little of what he meant, and seemed a little enlightened.

Yan Zhengming glanced at Cheng Qian's pensive look out of the corner of his eye and laughed bitterly to himself, swallowing the rest of his words — *yet you're unable to venture outside yourself*.

Outside, the heavens and the earth were vast, but you could never truly experience the vastness of it all.

This was the feeling that 'Point-break' had given him.

And the next level after 'Point-break' was 'Sheathe'.

Sword cultivators were different from cultivators of other paths, in that they experienced very little enlightenment. The more they were pressed, the more powerfully they could rebound. Back then, Yan Zhengming had been suppressed by the ancient Great Dragon and agitated by Cheng Qian's unwitting words. Pressed by both sides, he finally forced himself into Point-break.

Sword cultivators could trample the lands easily, but very few of them could reach the peak, because this path was truly difficult.

Right then, Cheng Qian noticed something and abruptly stood. In an instant, he had reached the entrance and opened the door. At the entrance of the Stone Seed, a hunchbacked old man stood, holding a lantern that swayed with the wind. He made no sound, only silently waiting right there.

This old man didn't seem to be a cultivator. When cultivators approached the end of their lifespan, they would also show signs of waning, but their aging rarely felt so vivid. And yet, this person's bearing was definitely nothing like an ordinary person's either.

The top of the old man's head only reached Cheng Qian's chest. When he saw the door open, he slowly raised his face. The old man's eyes were

murky like a blind man's, but his gaze felt like two rusty awls.

He examined Cheng Qian from the top of his head to the tips of his toes. The downturned corners of his lips moved slightly as he spoke in a low voice, "Young man, you've only experienced seven lightning tribulations. The difficulties ahead of you aren't over yet."

The surrounding was dead silent. Nobody was discussing the old bastard who looked like he was visiting the dead — because the old man had walked out of the Scarlet Bird Tower right under everyone's eyes.

Cheng Qian's pupils shrunk slightly. "Old man, you..."

But the old man didn't spare him another look and went right past him. With limping footsteps, he came to stand in front of Yan Zhengming and said seriously, "Sect Leader, please come with me. My master has left something behind."

Before Yan Zhengming could answer, the old man had turned around to walk off by himself, as if certain that he would follow.

Yan Zhengming hurriedly made a sign to Li Yun as he went after the old man. Shuikeng had learned her lesson about attracting attention from before, so she hovered in between Cheng Qian and Li Yun for a moment before decisively making her choice — she flew into Cheng Qian's sleeve, leaving Li Yun behind to clear away the Stone Seed like some kind of maidservant.

Under gazes of envy, resentment, and confusion, the group followed the old man from the Scarlet Bird Tower. Nobody spoke a word. The Scarlet Bird Tower opened every year and had been doing so for a hundred years, if there really was anything valuable, they would've been mostly taken by others already. Formidable masters treasured their own honor, so they

wouldn't come to pick the leftovers. The people who had come to try their luck at the moment were mostly not very noteworthy, so nobody dared to provoke them.

The heatwave around the Scarlet Bird Tower parted with the old man's steps, creating a gap for them to pass. Ice and fire were mutually destructive; Shuangren was thrumming, and even though Cheng Qian could withstand the heat, it was extremely uncomfortable. Right then, an especially malicious gaze drilled straight into his back. Cheng Qian quickly turned his head and swept his eyes over the crowd. At last, he saw the carriage of the fop that they'd taught a lesson to before.

It's just a nobody who hasn't even achieved Concretion, Cheng Qian thought as he withdrew his gaze.

Yet, whether it was because the Scarlet Bird Tower's surrounding was too hot or some other reason, his heart couldn't seem to settle down. It was as if something under the surface was about to happen.

After a long while, they finally arrived at the foot of the Scarlet Bird Tower following the old man's tottering lead. The dilapidated door had a few rusted bells, which started swaying slightly, as if knowing that someone had come, producing dull sounds. The old man pushed the door open a bit strenuously and said in a low voice, "Come in."

Yan Zhengming said, "Senior, we hadn't come here for the Scarlet Bird Tower. It's just that back when my master sealed the mountain, he'd left a lock behind. One of the chants for the lock was kept by Senior Xu, we've come to ask for..."

As if he hadn't heard him, the old man cut him off, "Come in."

It was pitch black inside the Scarlet Bird Tower. Yan Zhengming frowned and entered first, lifting the ends of his robes. Heatwave was rolling outside, but it was cold and damp inside. The contrast was stark. Facing the sudden change in temperature, their hairs stood on end.

Panting with exertion, the old man lit each of the lights inside the tower. The scent of dirt rose from the ground. Without any windows in there, it was dark all around, so it felt a bit oppressive.

Cheng Qian's body was molded from a celestial artifact, so even if he didn't know much about valuable artifacts, he was quite sensitive to the spiritual and malicious energy contained within them. But when he looked around, he found that this place didn't have mountains of valuables like rumored outside. There was nothing but bare walls.

The old man led them past a narrow stairway straight to the top of the tower. A stone statue stood here, its carving meticulous and fine, almost lifelike. It was a man with a slender figure, his brows and eyes clearly defined, about one finger-width apart. The tips of his brows were slightly upturned, giving him a slightly androgynous air.

The old man respectfully bowed in greeting to the statue. "Master, the guests have come."

So the statue was the master of this place, Xu Yingzhi.

It quickly occurred to Yan Zhengming that he needed their favor, so he quickly put on his most humble and respectful look, which was quite convincing. He stood not far behind the old man and assumed a junior's obeisance, "Many thanks for Senior's hospitality."

The old man gave him a look. Though he didn't express anything, he was probably satisfied enough. He fumbled around to light some incense for the

statue and took out a simple wooden box from behind the incense burner table, presenting it to Yan Zhengming. “This old servant is the tower spirit of the Scarlet Bird Tower, I’ve been relying on Master’s energy to live. Master has passed away for so many years, the Qi in the Scarlet Bird Tower is also running out. I’ve always been worried that I wouldn’t be able to return this to your sect, but now I can rest easy.”

Yan Zhengming opened the box. Inside it were three old copper coins.

He was a bit stunned and looked at the tower spirit in slight confusion.

But the old tower spirit didn’t explain further, only waving his hand, “It’s yours.”

Then he turned into azure smoke, disappearing into the azure lantern on top of the statue’s head.

Yan Zhengming had no idea if the three ancient coins had some kind of hidden trick, so he didn’t dare to touch them carelessly. Right when he was about to turn around and ask the ‘all-knowing’ Li Yun, all of a sudden, the bells in the Scarlet Bird Tower rang loudly. The lantern on top of the statue’s head dimmed and brightened at random. Countless dark shadows crept up from every direction. A pale hand suddenly broke through the protective barrier on top of Scarlet Bird Tower, reaching toward Yan Zhengming.

Yan Zhengming thought, *Seeking death?*

Before the hand could reach him, it had been cut by the sword aura around him and flew off starting from the wrist. But there was no blood, only a cloud of black energy, scattering into countless completely black snakes, which watched the people they were surrounding like a predator eyeing its prey.

The person whose hand had been cut off slowly came out from the darkness. Surprisingly, it was the fop that they had met before. But there was a bizarre dark aura around him, a rigid and abnormal smile plastered on his face. When he opened his mouth, what came out wasn't a human's voice, but hissing sounds.

The azure lamp on top of the statue swayed a little before entirely going out. The tower spirit had become like a turtle hiding in its shell.

Cheng Qian asked in a low voice, "What is this?"

Li Yun shook his head with a heavy face. Demonic beings could possess people, that was true. But this fop's behavior didn't seem like a possessed person... it was as if he was a demonic cultivator to begin with.

But they had only fought him earlier today, that was impossible.

Cheng Qian's gaze swept over the surroundings. He realized that the small black snakes were increasing, but they weren't coming closer to the others, as if they had locked onto Yan Zhengming alone.

He abruptly unsheathed Shuangren. The frosty aura went straight toward the fop, but right then, a hand suddenly caught his shoulder from behind. Yan Zhengming shoved him out of the way, his voice deep in his throat, "Move aside —"

Cheng Qian caught a glimpse of the vague xinmo mark in between his brows and started. "Wait, Shi..."

Yan Zhengming had entirely turned into a sword. The fop lightly flew out, enveloped by the wind from the sword, his smile becoming even stranger. Almost effortlessly, the tip of his foot tapped on the outer wall of the Scarlet Bird Tower as he spread his arms, as if to embrace the sword wind. Then he

was completely sliced through by Yan Zhengming, split from the top of his head to the tips of his feet. The cut up body separated in two. One half fell to the side in a mess of blood and gore, twitched a little, and died completely. But the other half turned into a thick dark mist. Not only did it not try to dodge, it went straight toward Yan Zhengming.

The three copper coins in Yan Zhengming's hands suddenly started rattling. That dark mist hesitated slightly. Right then, Cheng Qian's sword swooped in. The thick white frost instantly formed an ice wall, isolating the dark mist outside.

The three copper coins abruptly burst out of the wooden box, sinking straight into the Sect Leader's Seal hanging on Yan Zhengming's neck. A buzzing sound rang in his head. It felt like his primordial spirit was being forcefully pulled out by some kind of unopposable force into the Sect Leader's Seal.

All sorts of images passed in a flurry, and with a click, the Scarlet Bird square in the Lock of Earth was opened. Yan Zhengming's vision went dark. When he opened his eyes again, he realized that he was standing in a foreign place. The statue had come to life, holding three copper coins, silently sitting behind a stone table with his head lowered.

In his shock, Yan Zhengming saw his reflection from a cup of tea on the table, and realized that he seemed to have entered his Shizu Lord Beiming's body again.

He felt like crying, just a little. He had no idea what kind of fated affinity he had with this treacherous Shizu of his.

The atmosphere on the two sides of the stone table was heavy. A wooden tablet lay facing down on the table. The Lord of the Scarlet Bird Tower, Xu

Yingzhi, reached out to turn it over, revealing the words ‘Han Muchun’ on it.

Yan Zhengming’s heart shook. A part of it was his own surprise at seeing Shifu’s name, while the other part of it seemed to have come from Lord Beiming’s heart.

Xu Yingzhi then spoke up, “Premature death.”

Yan Zhengming heard his own... No, his Shizu's hoarse voice asking, "How do you resolve it?"

Xu Yingzhi's eyelids drooped as he spoke with an unaffected air of apathy, "Tong Ru, if you believe in destiny, you should know about the saying 'In the unseen world, everyone has their own fate'. This kind of thing can't be changed by a common person. Even if you don't believe in destiny, you must've heard of the saying 'Foreknowledge of the future is the culmination of the Dao and the beginning of ignorance'. Knowledge of the happenings five hundred years in the future or in the past are both fabricated. But you, on one hand, you have no doubts about what you had seen in the 'Realm of the Three Lives [1]', yet on the other hand you came asking me how to resolve it, isn't that laughable? I advise you to let nature take its course, don't waste your time on an unsolvable problem."

Things like 'Realm of the Three Lives' or 'premature death', even though Yan Zhengming didn't know the entire story and couldn't make heads or tails of it, he could still feel that this old bastard Xu was only talking big because he wasn't directly involved.

Lord Beiming — Tong Ru didn't say anything for a while after hearing this. But Yan Zhengming could feel a familiar helplessness and an even fiercer anger in his chest.

Out of nowhere, he seemed to have realized why he was so drawn to this Shizu that he had never met before. It seemed like they were commiserating with each other over the same suffering.

Xu Yingzhi made a gesture with his hand, and the three copper coins jumped into his palm. The thin calluses on this person's fingertips seemed like they had been molded by repeatedly brushing the veins of fate.

He sighed, saying in a slightly gentler voice, "From ancient times, prosperity comes with decline, success comes with failure. You and I are both people on the path of cultivation, what is there to prevent you from accepting an unpleasant situation? On this path, whether it be open strife and veiled struggle, or karma and destiny, when it all comes down to it, isn't everything done to achieve the Dao and longevity, escaping the lot of man in the mortal world? Tong Ru, your natural gifts are outstanding, you can go further than other people. Whether it be parental, brotherly, or master-disciple relationships, they're all bonds of the mortal world — in other words, wild fancies. Cut them off soon, don't obstinately keep refusing to see sense."

Tong Ru, "I'm not..."

Xu Yingzhi cut him off, "Fondness is a form of obsession, who do you hold fondly in your heart?"

Tong Ru turned his head slightly to the side, avoiding that gaze. After a long while, he bitterly asked, "If you were to predict the end of your own lifespan one day, could you also accept it simply with the words 'The bonds of this world must come to an end, this is how it's meant to be'?"

Xu Yingzhi's expression didn't change. He only said, "Morning mold and cicadas, ants and I, we are all the same [2]. Resenting the heavens and the earth, isn't that laughable?"

Yan Zhengming finally understood, the Lord of Scarlet Bird Tower was no different whether as a living person or as a statue. In his eyes, the world was

but an illusion, everything was laughable for him. Pestering him about these things was the real pointless thing.

To be honest —

In the face of the eternal skies, was the rise and fall of a kingdom important?

Thousands of people come and go endlessly, would a single person's life and death, or honor and humiliation, hold any importance?

Looking from an objective view, Xu Yingzhi's words were completely right, everyone in the world understood this logic. But in this mortal world, from as small as a family to as big as a country, who wouldn't spend their thoughts on these 'trivial matters'? All those separations in life and death, love and hatred, the thousands of years and hundreds of generations, they were all but small ripples amid great waves, they weren't even worth mentioning.

But when they really fell upon a person, wouldn't they still cause a heart-wrenching pain?

As long as they weren't blind, anyone standing in the distance would be able to see the unending mountains and rivers, but when they stood amid the mountains themselves, would they be able to find where they were in the recesses of the clouds and mist?

While Yan Zhengming scoffed in contempt, he was also trying to figure out how to fight his way out of this strange place. Then his field of vision shifted — Tong Ru had stood up. "You're wrong, Yingzhi. Countless people from generations before us had sought longevity, has anyone ever attained it? Life will come to an end sooner or later, ants and I are both similar and different — ants have fleeting lives, just like me. But ants will turn into dirt

after dying, while my soul can keep living in the vessels of the Fuyao Mountain. As long as the succession isn't broken, the vessels won't be broken either. Why would I seek that purely illusory longevity?"

Xu Yingzhi realized that the difference in their perspectives made it impossible for them to see eye-to-eye, he couldn't change Tong Ru's mind, so he said, "Alright, if you insist on this way of thinking, I won't be able to do anything. But I can't help you. The Realm of the Three Lives can't be changed, it's immutable. The Fuyao Sect's destiny has truly come to an end, what do you want to do? From the ancient times, those who defied the natural order always had things backfire on them even when they struggled at the cost of their own lives. Old friend, are you going down this path too?"

"Don't forget, 'Fifty things affect the Great Dao, forty-nine of them are heaven's will [3]'. Nothing can end perfectly, but there is always a gleam of hope," Tong Ru said, "I will definitely find that one gleam of hope."

After that, he turned to leave.

But Xu Yingzhi suddenly called out to him, "Wait, Xiao-Chun..."

Tong Ru's steps halted slightly. He lowered his face and sighed, "It's not what you think."

Xu Yingzhi, "Then what do you feel about him?"

Tong Ru, "For so many years, Jiang Peng was only there in name, he was never even around. All this time, Xiao-Chun has been my only disciple. I have no indecent intention toward him, it's just..."

When he reached this point, he seemed to realize that there was no use explaining this to others. He suddenly sneered, took a few light steps, and disappeared.

Yan Zhengming, “...”

He had clearly felt the ache that had appeared for an instance in Shizu’s heart. The loneliness of thousands of years had all gathered on one person. After relying on each other for so long, their bonds had long since gone as deep as the sea in the Northern Underworld. Just by looking at that person, it felt like the field of his heart was flourishing.

As for anything else... how could he dare, as the master.

Yan Zhengming immediately felt alarmed. He suspected that something must be wrong with his own senses and brain — was the ‘indecent intention’ mentioned earlier the type he was thinking about?

A large amount of strange vulgar folk tales erupted in Sect Leader Yan’s brain. He felt like his entire person had gone indecent. His dignity as the sect leader had completely shattered, far beyond salvation.

Right then, the scenery in front of him changed. His vision spun, and the next moment, he had returned to Fuyao Mountain with Shizu.

In that instance, he couldn’t even be bothered to ponder the indecency of his seniors’ relationship. His entire heart ached as he desperately wished for Shizu to slow his footsteps, so he could look at Fuyao Mountain again through the eyes of the past.

But Shizu was running faster than a rabbit, taking him past in a flurry of images. In the blink of an eye, they had reached the back mountain.

The Valley of Yao was wide open. Zipeng Zhenren and quite a few great *yao* that Yan Zhengming didn’t know seemed to have come out to explain something to Tong Ru. The sounds were indistinct, Yan Zhengming

couldn't distinguish them at the moment, but it felt like all these *yao* were trying to stop him.

But there was no changing Tong Ru's mind. He leapt down to the valley at the bottom of the abyss.

Yan Zhengming's eyes almost bulged out of their sockets. The next moment, his vision went blurry. Through Tong Ru's body, he could feel the extreme pain of thousands of arrows piercing his heart. Even with his perseverance as a sword cultivator, his vision went dark for a moment, and he was beaten back in the blink of an eye.

When Yan Zhengming finally came back to himself, breathing heavily, he saw Tong Ru kneeling a small distance away, on top of a tall platform.

Was there a place like this at the back of Fuyao Mountain?

Yan Zhengming couldn't remember, he hadn't gone through the road of the back mountain that many times. He had always felt like there was something extremely frightening at the bottom of the valley, so he had never dared to look down.

He couldn't help looking where Tong Ru had come. The stairway was so long it seemed to reach the heavens, one couldn't even see its end. Countless flights of steps lay one upon the other, clouds covering them about partway. There was one bloody footprint on each of the stone steps. It was quite a frightening sight — this didn't seem like an easy path.

Yan Zhengming turned to Tong Ru again and saw that he was actually kneeling in front of a stone.

Yan Zhengming rubbed his eyes, came forward to identify it carefully, and thought, *Is this how the stone in Xiao-Qian's courtyard came to be? So it*

really is the Wish-Granting Stone that everyone on Azure Dragon Island was coveting? But... Does a stone that could grant wishes really exist in this world?

Before this, he had never craved any sort of unusual treasures. Yan Zhengming had seen a lot of quality goods dabbling in the black market, some of which he had peddled off while keeping others. Most of the ones he kept would be given to his Shidi and Shimei as playthings — when sword cultivators reached his level, they definitely wouldn't need outside objects as support. But when he stared at this compelling stone, an idea flashed briefly. He suddenly felt an irresistible longing for it.

When they were young, they had often played in Cheng Qian's courtyard. But other than to cool off on hot days, nobody would spare a longer glance at this stone. Thinking about it now, it was probably because they were truly innocent back then and had nothing to wish for.

As if possessed, Yan Zhengming thought: if he had this stone right now, could he wish for the Mountain-Sealing Decree on Fuyao Mountain to be undone? Could he return to the past — where Han Yuan hadn't fallen into the demonic path, Cheng Qian hadn't gone missing for a hundred years, Shifu had returned to life, and the Yan family was powerful and wealthy as ever. They'd stay on top of the mountain, untouched by the conflicts of the world, free and unrestrained. Those who wanted to work hard would work hard, while the ones who didn't want to work hard would make a ruckus with each other...

Separated by a boundless void, Yan Zhengming stared at the stone. As if driven by a demon, he reached out, his hand almost overlapping with Tong Ru's.

In that instance, he seemed to have heard the great sound of bells, the deafening ring almost shaking his entire soul.

Tong Ru's journey up the mountain, blood staining each of his footsteps, overlapped with Yan Zhengming's hundred years of searching. Cheng Qian turning cold in his arms overlapped with Shifu's soul being dispersed. Yan Zhengming screamed, his eyes turning red. The xinmo that had been fermenting in his heart for so many years finally burst out of the spot between his brows, falling in front of his eyes, turning into Cheng Qian's form.

Cheng Qian's body was covered in blood, the hole in his chest seemed like it could never be mended. Yan Zhengming instantly forgot where he was. He staggered forward, reaching out to catch Cheng Qian. "Someone save him! Shifu... Shifu, Shizu... where have you all run off to, please look at Xiao-Qian for me..."

Right then, the Wish-Granting Stone behind him suddenly produced an indigo light, slowly spreading over. It enveloped Cheng Qian's body, filling the lethal wound in his chest. All the bloodstains slowly disappeared.

Yan Zhengming's heart was in great turmoil, experiencing both great sorrow and joy. He fell to his knees, mind turning blank for a moment. As he looked at Cheng Qian in a trance, Xu Yingzhi's question for Tong Ru seemed to ring right next to his ears: *Then what do you feel about him?*

The Cheng Qian in his arms looked like he had fallen asleep, lying there obediently without moving. Yan Zhengming reached out, as if possessed, finger slowly tracing down his cheek, and finally stopping on Cheng Qian's lips. He first touched them lightly and abruptly withdrew his finger, as if he had been burned. A moment later, he experimentally tried to touch them again.

What do you feel about him?

In that instant, Yan Zhengming seemed to have split into two. One of them exclaimed in righteous anger, “Cheng Qian is your Shidi, are you a swine? Preposterous!”

But the other one stared at Cheng Qian’s pale lips in spite of himself. The strange emotion in the Sect Leader’s Seal from back then, which he couldn’t even tell whether it had come from Lord Beiming’s heart or his own, was tumultuously surging in his heart. “This is my Xiao-Qian.”

In that instance, he finally saw the true form of the xinmo that had lingered around him for so long.

A sharp pain seemed like it was about to burst out of his chest. Yan Zhengming held onto Cheng Qian tightly, unwilling to let go no matter what. Then, the surroundings suddenly faded away in an instant, as if an explosion had occurred. Yan Zhengming’s primordial spirit was forcefully pushed back into his own body.

He opened his eyes and saw Li Yun anxiously shaking him and yelling something.

At that time, Yan Zhengming had suddenly collapsed with no warning. The little snakes all fought to pile on him like crazy.

Logically speaking, for a Point-break sword cultivator, there should’ve been a bone-deep vicious aura around them, which would inspire fear in demonic beings, so they should’ve long since become immune to most harm. But those mysterious snakes were somehow completely unaffected.

They were only a little scared of Shuangren and had been swept off by Cheng Qian. But even though they could be forced back, they couldn’t be killed.

These snakes were unaffected by fire, water, or the wind, swords couldn't cut them, and the cold could only force them back a little. Even though the Scarlet Bird Tower gave off a cold, damp impression, it was still a place of great heat after all, so Cheng Qian couldn't quite unleash his full strength.

Shuikeng flapped her wings as she flew around, chirping, "What are these things? Er-shixiong, didn't you say the five elements can enhance and inhibit each other, that all things on earth must have one weakness? What's with these things! What kind of incense did Da-shixiong switch to recently, why is he attracting bugs?"

... It was a good thing Da-shixiong hadn't woken up, otherwise he would've roasted her if he'd heard those words.

But Cheng Qian's heart thumped. He suddenly recalled something Tang Zhen had said before, "The five elements can enhance and inhibit each other, but xinmo conquers all. No matter how powerful or wise you are, you can't guard against it, you're powerless."

Cheng Qian abruptly withdrew his own living aura, ridding his mind of distracting thoughts. He entirely turned into a jade covered in cold frost, transparently clear.

The effect was instant. All of the snakes treated him as a dead object like Shuangren, dodging the cold chill. Cheng Qian forcefully took on the violent heat around the Scarlet Bird Tower, freezing the place from the inside to the outside.

Xu Yingzhi's stone statue was covered in a layer of thin ice. The inside of the tower looked like it had been hit by a blizzard. All of the snakes were forced to the corners of the tower like swept leaves. Right then, Cheng Qian caught a black figure flitting by, about to squeeze into the only source of fire in this place — the small lantern.

It was the exact thing Cheng Qian was waiting for. His sword came down, splitting the black figure in two.

A roar caused the bells outside the Scarlet Bird Tower to ring. But the two halved black figures abruptly increased in size, twisting into one in the air, turning into a human figure. It showed a familiar face, smiling sinisterly at Cheng Qian, “Little Shixiong, are you going to kill me to avenge yourself?”

Cheng Qian’s sword-wielding hand trembled. The tide-like sword tip turned, brushing past the dark figure, heavily hitting the Scarlet Bird Tower. His flawless disguise was instantly ruined. The demonic thing chuckled in a low voice and came forward. Bright red eyes met Cheng Qian’s gaze. The distance between them was no more than a hand’s breadth. Han Yuan’s grown-up features were exactly the same as Cheng Qian remembered them.

“Shixiong,” he drew out his adult voice so it sounded thinner and longer, the ends of his words carrying some hints of a child trying to act cute, saying lightly, “There’s a river ahead, I had originally wanted to catch some fish for Shifu and Shixiong, but there’s a big dog at the riverside, it chased me...”

Those were the exact words that the little beggar had told Cheng Qian when Muchun Zhenren brought Cheng Qian and Han Yuan back. Not a single word was off.

The demon’s claws had reached out toward Cheng Qian’s neck.

But the next moment, a pillar of ice burst out from under his foot, almost stabbing through the demon. The demon retreated in alarm, but spears of ice started rising from the ground everywhere.

The demon was extremely scared of the chill from the icy lake. While retreating, he got stuck in between pillars of ice and desperately yelled,

“You cold-blooded person!”

“I’ve already taken my own revenge,” Cheng Qian said without a change in his expression, “I won’t touch a single hair on my Shidi.”

Even if the sect was to encounter a problem in the future and cleansing the filth of the sect was unavoidable, when the time came to punish Han Yuan for falling into the wrong path, Cheng Qian had decided not to side with anyone. If he really resented Han Yuan, he would’ve killed him long ago, back on the uninhabited island.

Cheng Qian had a fixed principle in his heart, as clear as a bright mirror. There wasn’t the slightest bit of confusion.

The chill in the Scarlet Bird Tower suddenly erupted, bursting into a snow-white firework around the demon. Fragments of ice spread out and quickly gathered again. Cheng Qian exclaimed in a low voice, “Seal!”

The demon wearing Han Yuan’s face was frozen in a pillar of ice as tall as a person.

All the black snakes in the Scarlet Bird Tower disappeared at the same time, only leaving half of the unnamed fop’s corpse lying in a corner, unmoving.

Cheng Qian silently gazed at the pillar of ice for a moment. Shuikeng also perched on his shoulder to size it up. Yan Zhengming pushed Li Yun away, getting to his feet with a heavy heart. He came to stand next to Cheng Qian, gave a short glance, and said, “It’s not a living thing, nor is it Han Yuan. This thing only took his form.”

There was no hiding the disappointment on Cheng Qian’s face.

Yan Zhengming instinctively wanted to reach out and pat him on the back, offering some comforting words. But he had only raised his hand halfway when he recalled the inordinate thoughts bound inside his xinmo. Then, as if he had a fish bone stuck in his throat, his gaze darkened and he stiffly turned his gaze away. “Let’s go. The Scarlet Bird lock has been opened, don’t waste any more time here.”

After that, he didn’t wait for anyone before walking down the dark stairs first, leaving the Scarlet Bird Tower.

Before their departure, Yan Zhengming turned to look at the cliff right next to the Scarlet Bird Tower. He could only feel that the span of the great abyss couldn’t even touch upon the depth of his own feelings.

[1] ‘*Realm of the Three Lives*’ The phrase used here is . The ‘three lives’ mentioned here refers to one’s present life, previous life, and next life.

[2] ‘*Morning mold and cicadas, ants and I, we are all the same*’ The phrase used here is . These are references to two things:

- ‘Morning mold and cicadas’: There’s a saying in Chinese that goes , which basically means ‘The morning mold doesn’t know of the period between dusk and dawn, cicadas don’t know of spring and autumn’. It’s meant to signify the fleetingness of life, and the limit of the knowledge and experience that could be earned in one’s lifetime.
- ‘Ants and I’: In Liu Yao, comparing people (even formidable masters) to ants is a recurring theme throughout the novel.

[3] ‘*Fifty things affect the Great Dao, forty-nine of them are heaven’s will*’ The phrase used here is . The basic gist is: Among the fifty

things that maintain the balance of the world, only forty-nine of them are actually taking effect; the fiftieth thing is the element that allows change to happen. Put simply, nothing in this world is set in stone, there is always a gleam of hope.

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“The one in my courtyard? Did you see correctly?” Cheng Qian said, slightly doubtful.

After returning from the Scarlet Bird Tower, the group went to rest at the same restaurant at the outskirts of Nanjiang. Yan Zhengming selectively told them what he had seen in the Sect Leader’s Seal — leaving out the beginning and the end, not mentioning all sorts of unmentionable dubiousness.

“Back then, whenever the weather turned hot, I’d copy scriptures on top of it. I didn’t notice anything unusual,” Cheng Qian shook his head, “Isn’t it just a stone with a smoother surface? I had thought that it was just a larger than average jade, at most.”

Shuikeng asked curiously, “Does a stone that grants wishes really exist in this world? San-shixiong, what had you been thinking when you copied scriptures on top of it, did any of them come true?”

Cheng Qian, “...”

Back then, he’d only thought that this big stone was probably worth some money, and had thought that if the Fuyao Sect were to fall into poverty in the future, they’d take this stone down the mountain and have someone carve something out of it to sell.

... It didn’t seem to have come true.

Cheng Qian maintained his unruffled composure with great difficulty and spoke calmly, “When you copy scriptures, you’re supposed to rid yourself of distracting thoughts, what could I be thinking?”

Shuikeng immediately felt immense admiration. She had never been able to rid herself of distracting thoughts.

Li Yun cut in, “Your San-shixiong was only a little over ten back then, the only things that he could actually want were practicing his penmanship and swordsmanship well, being able to find his energy feel soon, for Han Yuan to bother him less when he’s pulling pranks, for the incense burner Da-shixiong to scam farther away... Uh, Sect Leader, I didn’t mean that.”

Under Yan Zhengming’s piercing eyes, Li Yun laughed drily and turned the topic away, “From the ancient times until now, that stone is the only one of its kind in existence, it definitely wouldn’t bother with these trivial matters. By ‘wish-granting’, of course the wish in question is something unattainable, something that can’t be done through the efforts of man.”

“Stop showing off,” Yan Zhengming interrupted him, “Why don’t you tell me, what is the ‘Realm of the Three Lives’?”

“Stop jabbing at me, I actually have heard about that one.” Li Yun leaned back in his chair, raised his chin slightly, and said in triumph, “There are three thousand major secret realms and six thousand minor secret realms. Other than the ones that were occasionally discovered by people, most of them remain unknown. The earliest record of the ‘Realm of the Three Lives’ was found in *Diabolism*...”

“*Diabolism*?” Cheng Qian was stunned, “The text that had filled an entire wall at the lower level of the library? I had seen it when I was a kid, I didn’t see any mention of a secret realm.”

“Let me finish. The first parts of *Diabolism* recorded things like cultivation methods, those were completely boring. But there’s a section at the end called ‘Anecdote’, you definitely haven’t seen that,” Li Yun said with an air of self-satisfaction, “That ‘Anecdote’ was really quite interesting, it talked about so many great demon lords’ stories. Like killing for revenge, or resentment born out of love, or being tricked by others... A bunch of messy little stories, some of them are written quite dramatically.”

Cheng Qian had no idea what he was so proud of.

Li Yun said, “One of them was a record of the ‘Realm of the Three Lives’. It is said that this realm only appears once in three thousand years, and there was no way to look for it. It only opens for fated people each time. The thing is, though other secret realms might put the people who had entered them in danger, they would also give a great opportunity for improvement. But this ‘Realm of the Three Lives’ is extremely special, it would drive its so-called ‘fated people’ mad — it is said that there’s a mirror in the realm, which would show the fate of the person or thing that someone cares most about.”

Shuikeng, “Fate?”

This wasn’t a really good word, it had the slight implications of a bad end.

Li Yun nodded. “Nn. For example, someone who wholeheartedly wished for longevity would see their own old dying form. Whatever it is you wanted most, you would see things going against your wishes. You can imagine how that feels. Though it sounds like we’re just touching on it casually, if you were to go in yourself, nobody would be able to stay unaffected.”

Yan Zhengming frowned. “Don’t the ‘fated people’ chosen by this realm have some problems to begin with?”

He had already figured out most of the story in his mind — Tong Ru Shizu had somehow entered the Realm of the Three Lives. From his tone, he must've seen the Fuyao Sect's succession being broken. Then he hurriedly went to find the Lord of Scarlet Bird Tower, Xu Yingzhi made a prediction for him, and seemed to have pulled the worst possible prediction.

Then Tong Ru found the Wish-Granting Stone through some methods, the great *yao* in the Valley of Yao and Island Lord Gu had all tried to stop him, but he stubbornly persisted, causing him to experience a qi deviation. Then it triggered a series of events afterward, and at last, Xu Yingzhi's words came true, Tong Ru's attempts backfired, and he became the one to push the Fuyao Sect to its demise.

“Er-shixiong, you're so knowledgeable,” Shuikeng sighed with emotion, but then her tone changed, “But when are you going to turn me back?”

Li Yun, “Uh...”

Yan Zhengming also questioned him closely, “Your useless pile of grass, too. We could've raised goats with those, have you produced any Anti-Poison Pills?”

Li Yun, “I...”

“Then what are you waiting for!” After roaring that, Yan Zhengming pushed his chair away and started stalking off, throwing the words, “I'm going back to sleep, don't disturb me.”

The sect leader's flighty and impetuous manner was showing in his words and behavior. All three of the remaining people looked at each other.

Shuikeng heard the sound of a door and shook her feather. She cluelessly jumped on the table, asking, “Who provoked him?”

Her two Shixiong each started reflecting on themselves, giving each other looks that said ‘isn’t it you’, shirking the responsibility.

At last, Cheng Qian was struck by his guilty conscience. He touched his nose and said a little awkwardly, “It seems to be me.”

Shuikeng and Li Yun said at the same time, “What have you done now?”

Cheng Qian was actually more perplexed than those two. It seemed like without any rhyme or reason, Da-shixiong suddenly started ignoring him — he wouldn’t look in his direction, he wouldn’t continue his topic of discussion, and whenever Cheng Qian spoke, he’d either be looking around or pretending to think about something. In short, he just treated Cheng Qian like he didn’t exist.

When they entered the room, Cheng Qian had purposefully sat next to him. As a result, this strange sect leader of theirs immediately sat upright and still, the skin of his face pulled so tight it could be stripped off to use as a belt. His solemn face had a stern, inviolable air. One could almost see him hiding his face with his fan, saying, ‘I only sell my performance of arts, not my body [1]’.

The three of them looked at each other. It felt like everyone’s faces said ‘the sect leader has taken the wrong medicine’ and ‘the sect leader takes the wrong medicine every day’. They then went their own ways.

Li Yun went into seclusion for two days, producing a few bottles of Anti-Poison Pills. They had no idea what good those things were for, but it was better than having nothing. In these two days, Shuikeng felt that the power preventing her from turning back into a human was slowly starting to let up, so she diligently cultivated in her bird form every day, working much harder than she ever did as a human.

As for Sect Leader Yan, he had started his days of ‘never exiting the front gates, never stepping over the inner gates’. Every day, he wouldn’t even meet anyone, only speaking to people outside with the door as a barrier.

This wasn’t the first time Da-shixiong made trouble without reason, he’d had this bad habit since childhood. Cheng Qian’s usual method of dealing with this was silently going back to cultivate by himself. In any case, even if nobody paid any attention to him, he’d return to normal by himself.

But this time, Cheng Qian couldn’t help his mind straying constantly. He kept contemplating the words Li Yun had told him back then under the Great Dragon’s Banner.

And so, Cheng Qian silently got to his feet, sweeping his eyes over his completely untouched room and the cool water on the table. Even he could feel his own dullness. He turned around to exit the room, silently landing outside Yan Zhengming’s room. Just like a tranquil leaf, not even a speck of dust was disturbed as he sat on the slightly upturned eaves.

These days, the moon was only full on the sixteenth day of the month instead of the fifteenth. As a result, the actual day of Mid-Autumn became regrettably imperfect. The night sky of Nanjiang was clear, the moon was bright. Looking for too long would put you in a daze. The silhouettes of the distant mountains and the nearby trees were quite graceful.

Back on Fuyao Mountain when they were younger, for every year’s Mid-Autumn, Shifu would lead them to pay their respects to the ancestors and the moon, as if they were playing house. Then he would take them all to the ‘Unknown Hall’ to give out cakes and fruits. Back then, Da-shixiong had thought himself to have grown up, and often asked Shifu for freshly fermented liquor. But Shifu had always treated him like a child. He would take a large pot of Osmanthus-flower syrup, add a small cup of liquor for him to taste, and lie that it was authentic Osmanthus-flower wine.

Then, this habit was brought to the Azure Dragon Island by Da-shixiong. Every time he drank liquor, he had to water it down with Osmanthus-flower syrup, otherwise it wouldn't taste right.

The path of cultivation was long, but the annual festivity always felt like a new starting point. Each time they celebrated it, it felt like the past could also turn a new page.

But when Cheng Qian thought back on this, he felt like he was looking on those distant memories through a barrier of sorts.

He realized that his own blood had turned cold.

Cheng Qian suddenly leapt down from the eaves.

At the moment, the old shop owner had retired for the night, only leaving his daughter to balance the books. She was startled by Cheng Qian suddenly appearing in front of her. The young lady of the shop had a deep impression of his unsociable manner, so she was a bit nervous talking to him. She timidly came forward to ask, "Does the Young Master have any request?"

"Uh..." When the words came to the tip of his tongue, Cheng Qian realized that what he was about to say sounded a bit silly coming from himself. He hesitated for a moment and laughed slightly in self-deprecation, procuring some coins, "I'll have to trouble the Young Miss to purchase some things for me."

A moment later, Cheng Qian carried two liquor jars and an oil-paper package to knock on Yan Zhengming's door.

From inside came an annoyed response, "I'm in seclusion, why are you bothering me?"

This was the first time Cheng Qian encountered such a willful seclusion.

He stood silently at the door for a moment, thinking, *Why am I being so courteous with him?*

Thinking back now, when did he ever courteously knock on Yan Zhengming's door? When did he ever carefully keep Yan Zhengming in good humor?

Am I also uneasy? Cheng Qian thought.

Then he put his fingers together and made a slicing motion, easily cutting open the door of this ordinary inn. Cheng Qian unhurriedly lifted the hem of his robes, grandiosely breaking the door and entering. Under Yan Zhengming's dumbstruck eyes, he flicked his sleeve lightly and placed his things on the table, as if appropriating the spot for himself. Then he finally spoke, "Isn't it about enough for you, are you not satisfied yet?"

Yan Zhengming, "..."

Sect Leader Yan maintained his position sitting cross-legged. He blinked, as if dreaming. His eyes fell on the jars of liquor and the oil-paper package, and he asked dumbly, "What is this?"

Cheng Qian glanced at him and opened the oil-paper package, revealing the crudely made cakes inside. Then he opened one of the jars, the scent of liquor wafting out. The other jar was filled with syrup. Out of worry that the sugar wasn't clean, Cheng Qian swayed the jar forcefully a few times before mixing the two together. Then he beckoned for Yan Zhengming. "Come eat."

Yan Zhengming, "... I refuse food handed out in contempt."

Cheng Qian, “You won’t eat?”

Yan Zhengming was silent for a moment. Then he walked over, displaying his complete lack of a backbone.

Cheng Qian stood, saying, “I’m going to call the others...”

“Hey,” Yan Zhengming reached out to stop him, “No need, the two of them have been busy these past few days. Besides... after you left, we had dropped the habit of celebrating the festivity — sit down and drink with me.”

After a moment of hesitation, Cheng Qian sat at the table. He watched as Yan Zhengming took two cups, poured liquor in them, and pushed one toward Cheng Qian, asking, “Can you drink?”

“I can,” Cheng Qian nodded, “I just haven’t drunk in a very long time.”

Yan Zhengming sat on the other side of the table, eyes falling on Cheng Qian’s face. The full moon was much too bright, Cheng Qian couldn’t help feeling that Da-shixiong’s gaze was unusually serene.

Yan Zhengming said, “I noticed you would only touch water, I’d thought you couldn’t eat other things for the sake of cultivation.”

Cheng Qian paused, then spoke calmly, “While cultivating my primordial spirit in the Spirit-Condensing Jade, inedia was innate. Delicacies and fine liquor incite gluttony. Disorderly desires cause difficulties in enduring Heavenly Tribulations, so I decided to abstain from those unnecessary things altogether.”

Cultivators all started out as ordinary people after all, so their appetite and lust would always follow them for life. Especially food. It had been a habit for so many years, so even if their physical body had reached inedia, most cultivators would still maintain this habit from when they were ordinary mortals, unless they had reached a crucial time in cleansing their marrows, or if they had intentionally chosen cultivation methods that involved abstinence from all desires.

Yan Zhengming nodded. There were countless words in his heart, but in front of Cheng Qian, he didn't know where to start, so he could only lower his head and drink his liquor silently.

Cheng Qian took a small sip from his cup — even though it was supposed to be liquor, the alcoholic taste had been watered down by the syrup until barely any was left. A thick sweetness shot up his head. Cheng Qian was a bit unused to it, so he pursed his lips and put his cup down. The sweet taste took quite a while to disperse from his mouth, seemingly also awakening the sensory organ that had been out of use for so long.

Going down from his chest, warmth flowed into his heart and veins. Cheng Qian trembled minutely as he experienced the long-gone feeling of being a human.

Yan Zhengming suddenly asked out of nowhere, “Xiao-Qian, you rein yourself so strictly, is it also in order to achieve longevity and the Dao of the heavens?”

Cheng Qian had no idea where this was coming from. After a moment's pause, he replied, “I've never thought about it.”

Yan Zhengming tilted his head, looking at him.

Cheng Qian said, “Shifu once said, be it ascending or dying, there isn’t really any difference. I didn’t understand back then, but now that I think about it, they really were the same. In both cases, the bonds of the mortal world were severed, the people will meet again someday. The Dao of the heavens is so narrow, why would you rack your brains on it? It would be better to just live properly, so everyone can have fun together.”

Yan Zhengming asked softly, “Together with me... us [2], forever?”

“Who else?” It seemed that Cheng Qian had truly not lived the life of a mortal for too long, because just a sip of an extremely watered down ‘Osmanthus-flower wine’ could warm him up. He suddenly reached across the table to grab Yan Zhengming’s wrist, saying in a low voice, “Shixiong, I know about your problems.”

Yan Zhengming trembled, almost spilling his liquor. Half of his body immediately froze up. After a long while, he finally shook Cheng Qian’s hand off awkwardly, complaining, “We’re all grown-ups now, keep your hands to yourself.”

Perhaps it was because of the syrup, but the long-lasting knit in between Yan Zhengming’s brows was finally loosening. He sighed, “If all of you are fine and well, I won’t have any problems at all — especially you.”

Cheng Qian brushed his fingertips against the side of his cup, smiling, “I know.”

“What do you know?” Yan Zhengming couldn’t help laughing. He shook his head and lowered his head to pick up the snacks Cheng Qian brought. The anxious feeling in his heart seemed to have faded slightly. It felt like this really wasn’t such a big deal, Cheng Qian wasn’t going to leave anyway. In the future, he would follow him everywhere he went, looking

for the moment to return to Fuyao Mountain. What else could he ever hope for?

The tumultuous worries that had been filling Yan Zhengming's heart for days finally started to subside. He pinched the hard outer layer of the snack, reverting back to his old habits, "Hey, you cheapskate, how much did you spend on these snacks? They're so hard they could crack a skull, are they anything to feed people with?"

Cheng Qian said with a smile, "Eat it or leave it, troublesome pest."

After he said that, he lifted the cup and downed the entire drink that was more syrup than liquor.

As soon as the liquor reached his throat, Cheng Qian could feel something was off, but he couldn't spit it out even if he regretted it. Before Yan Zhengming could reply, he saw Cheng Qian in a daze, reaching out as if trying to grab something to regain his balance. Before he could get a firm grip of the table's edge, he collapsed without warning.

This god damned Spirit-Condensing Jade was actually an extreme lightweight [3]!

Unfortunately, under the full moon of the Mid-Autumn, not everyone was quite so peaceful and carefree.

These past few days, the fop's group were in a terrible fix. They wished they could dig into the ground to find their young master, who had gone missing without reason.

On the night of Mid-Autumn, a commotion filled the area surrounding the Scarlet Bird Tower. Everyone was looking forward to the peak of the tower, for the doors to open. In contrast to them, two primordial spirit cultivators

standing in front of a luxurious flying horse carriage were waiting anxiously for the result of their underlings' search.

A middle-aged man walked over hurriedly, shaking his head at the two old men with a heavy face. He said in a low voice, "Seniors, no news... Young Master had been insistent on entering the Scarlet Bird Tower, do you think he could've snuck in with those people that day?"

One of the old men shook his head. "Don't you know the young master's cultivation? Even if he had crammed himself with numerous artifacts, how could he sneak into the Scarlet Bird Tower so easily? Look again... Ah, Young Master had willfully run away from home by himself, our lord had told us to protect him..."

Before he could finish his words, a round of exclamations suddenly erupted from the crowd. The annual time for the Scarlet Bird Tower's doors opening had arrived, the menacing fiery aura around the tower abruptly cooled. The tower doors were blown open with a bang, but nobody came out. There was only a faint black aura rolling inside.

Someone spoke up, "Everyone, look, this year's Scarlet Bird Tower seems a bit off..."

[1] *'I only sell my performance of arts, not my body'* The phrase used here is . is a deprecatory form of self-address for women, formerly used by a wife when speaking to her husband, but by itself means concubine. The entire phrase basically means 'I am not a whore'.

[2] ‘*me... us*’ The phrase used here is In Chinese, turning ‘I’ into ‘we’ is just a matter of adding an extra word to ‘I’. So it sounded less deliberate when Yan Zhengming turned ‘me’ into ‘us’ in Chinese.

[3] ‘*extreme lightweight*’ The phrase used here is , which literally means ‘knocked out with one cup’.

Dark clouds gathered out of nowhere, completely obscuring the bright moon. Lightning suddenly struck despite the previously clear weather, turning half of the sky a ghastly white.

The lightning happened to fall on the Scarlet Bird Tower. All eighty-one bells on the tower rang at the same time, the sounds of the bells so urgent that it seemed to be ushering someone to their death.

Then there was a loud sound. The Scarlet Bird Tower, which had lasted for a thousand years, split into two down the middle. The old wall cracked inch by inch, and in an instant, the tower had been reduced to smithereens.

The inside of the Scarlet Bird Tower, which had been coveted by countless people, was finally revealed to everyone's eyes —

There was nothing behind the shattered tower. It was like a destitute prisoner cage. The master's androgynous stone statue sat in the middle, as if haunting the place. An oil lamp on the verge of falling still hung above its head, swaying like a person being hanged.

The statue's downturned features seemed to contain a boundless sorrow. The oil lamp's violently jumping light brightened and dimmed at random. All of a sudden, a turtle shell fell from the statue's hand. It turned upside down on the ground, shaking violently and revealing the word 'Chaos' carved behind it.

Unfortunately, nobody got to see it. The next moment, the turtle shell and the stone statue disappeared at the same time without warning.

The hanging oil lamp seemed to exhale an old sigh, its fire slowly dying out.

The Scarlet Bird Tower was no more, the tower spirit that had protected the place for a hundred years must've departed with it too.

Right then, someone who happened to have sharper eyes saw something else and asked the people nearby, "Look, isn't that a pillar of ice, what's frozen in it?"

Everyone looked over and finally saw that under the lamp, there was a large pillar of ice about as tall of a person. In it, there was a person whose features weren't clear. The dark aura around that person repeatedly darted back and forth, almost breaking through. It was so dark that it seemed one with the night sky.

There was a saying, 'The spirit of the living can't be exterminated, xinmo can't die'. This thing couldn't be killed, it couldn't be eliminated, so Cheng Qian could only use 'Seal', sealing it in ice.

Cheng Qian's original reasoning was, other than some rusty metal, there was only a tower spirit who wasn't a person inside the Scarlet Bird Tower. Sealed in the ice, that xinmo wouldn't have any source of power, and would definitely weaken as time passed. Even if the pillar of ice were to melt after ten to twenty years, that xinmo would've 'starved' to death by that point.

Who would've thought that this seemingly everlasting Scarlet Bird Tower would shatter to pieces in an instant right then!

Thick dark clouds came from the south, enveloping that pillar of ice like an unending stream, as if summoned by something.

The sharper cultivators on the spot had prepared to run after seeing this scene.

The two primordial spirit cultivators at the carriage had seen quite a bit of the world, after all. One of them, the taller and leaner one, spoke up, “This demonic energy could pierce the heavens, it’s not a good sign.”

The shorter and stouter one said, “People often say Nanjiang is filled with Nightmare Walkers, I don’t think it’s a baseless rumor. No matter what, let’s leave first.”

The taller old man sighed, asking a bit helplessly, “Then what about the young master?”

Before the shorter old man could reply, a cultivator next to them exclaimed, “Senior, hurry and look!”

There was a piece of grey silk attached to the cultivator’s waist. The silk was standing straight as if alive, drifting with the wind, and slowly pointing in the Scarlet Bird Tower’s direction.

The cultivator hurriedly said, “Senior, this is a ‘Tracking Silk’. When we came, I was worried that an accident might happen, so I attached the other half to the young master. The Tracking Silk must’ve been cut off by the Scarlet Bird Tower before this, but now that the Scarlet Bird Tower has been blown up, it immediately detected the young master’s location.”

Hearing this, the taller old man’s expression immediately shifted as he exclaimed, “How can the young master be in the Scarlet Bird Tower? What, what should we do?”

There wasn't anything they could do — right then, a roar that shook the heavens and the earth was heard in the distance. All of the dark aura had gathered around the pillar of ice like a vortex, turning into a dragon. It rose into the heavens, circling around the pillar of ice.

Someone seemed to be murmuring, "When the flood dragon turns into a dragon, the world falls into chaos..."

The dragon craned its neck toward the heavens, its roar shaking the great mountains of Nanjiang. The pillar of ice produced a crisp sound as a crack abruptly appeared on it. It spread down from the top, and in an instant, the pillar had split open. The dark figure sealed in the pillar joined with the giant dragon, winding up toward the horizon.

The heavens shook, the stars and the moon turned dim all at once. The dark aura all over the mountain was like an inextinguishable fire, swallowing half of the landscape.

Even the gods would be alarmed.

The shorter primordial spirit cultivator exclaimed, "Go! Go! Let's go!"

Yet, though he was a formidable master, his voice wasn't much louder than an insect's under these circumstances. The primordial spirit cultivator clenched his teeth and decided to abandon his comrades, scrambling to escape with his dear life.

Right in the instant when his sword rose into the sky, the place that used to be the Scarlet Bird Tower seemed to open its mouth, emitting a putrid scent. In an instant, it had swallowed everyone on the spot. Body and spirit, not a single one could escape.

When the short primordial spirit cultivator saw this, he didn't even dare to look back and fled straight to the north.

At the same time in the restaurant at the border, Cheng Qian collapsed without a warning, startling Yan Zhengming quite greatly.

After smacking and yelling at him for a moment, he finally realized that Cheng Qian had been knocked out by the Osmanthus-flower syrup mixed with a tiny bit of liquor. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Yan Zhengming completely didn't expect that his seemingly all-conquering Shidi would fall so easily. He stood at a loss and anxious for quite a while, and finally realized what he was supposed to do. He stepped forward and explained to heavens knew who, "Lie down on the bed."

Of course, nobody would answer him. After saying this, Yan Zhengming seemed to have earned some kind of approval. He carefully held his breath, bent down to pick Cheng Qian up, and put him in his bed, which was so clean that not even a strand of hair could be found on it.

Yan Zhengming stared at Cheng Qian for a moment and experimentally reached out, lightly tapping twice on his face. "Hey, you really can't even drink a sip?"

Cheng Qian showed no response.

Yan Zhengming couldn't help feeling elated — even though he himself had no idea what he was so pleased about. If he had a tail, it would've been standing straight, pointing at the sky. He poked Cheng Qian's forehead, saying, "Look how formidable you are."

Cheng Qian's head tilted slightly from his poking. His breath seemed to carry the scent of Osmanthus flower and liquor. Since it was just a

commoner's liquor, with Cheng Qian's constitution, even if he was unconscious, his core would still circulate the liquor out on its own. Even if he had gotten drunk, he would only be drunk for a short while.

So Yan Zhengming used this short while to sit at the bedside, delineating Cheng Qian's features with his gaze. His heart, which had only just settled down earlier, became tumultuous again, as if someone had tossed a stone into the lake of his heart.

He was just like a poor child keeping watch on a piece of candy, tempted to covet his charge for himself. But he also didn't have the guts to commit the crime, so he could only look helplessly while letting his imaginations run wild. Even though he didn't dare to touch a single strand of Cheng Qian's hair, he had almost driven his own heart out of his throat with his thoughts, a foolish smile hanging on his face.

Right then, an unusual stir came from outside the window.

Yan Zhengming, who had been like a rat thrown into a pot of rice, abruptly came back to himself from his improper fantasies. His expression turned solemn as he struck the window open through the air.

The birds in the courtyard all seemed to have been frightened and were desperately flapping their wings to escape. A strange color was rising from the south sky, dark clouds rolling like waves. A gigantic pressure came following the dark and gloomy night sky. Yan Zhengming couldn't be bothered to look at anyone's sleeping face anymore and reached back to press his palm on the center of Cheng Qian's back. His energy, which seemed to contain some sort of sharpness, flowed in through where they were touching, immediately stirring up the core in Cheng Qian's body. The liquor that wasn't much to begin with was instantly eliminated.

Cheng Qian snapped awake coughing. Being woken forcefully by an outside energy was naturally not a good feeling. His breath was stuck in his chest for a moment, his temples throbbing. Cheng Qian's brows knitted tightly as he struggled to straighten himself, thinking that if Yan Niangniang dared to tell him that the strike was because his shoes weren't off, he definitely would disrespect his senior then.

In that short time, Yan Zhengming had gone to stand in front of the window, saying with his back to Cheng Qian, "You damn lightweight, get up, something's happened."

Shuangren, which Cheng Qian had tossed onto the table earlier, was thrumming. He pinched the spot in between his brows forcefully. "What happened?"

Before he could finish his words, the door that Cheng Qian had broken through by force earlier was kicked open once more. Li Yun burst in carrying a large long-legged bird half the size of a person, "Da-shixiong... uh, Xiao, Xiao-Qian?"

It wasn't strange for Cheng Qian to be here. What was strange, was the place he was sitting.

Li Yun had one foot over the threshold, his expression both hesitant and awkward. He practically couldn't enter or retreat.

Even with the looming unknown threat, Yan Zhengming was still guilty by his eyes and snapped, "Why are you just standing there? Scram in!"

Cheng Qian looked at the listless large bird and asked, "Is this Shimei?"

"Her *yao* bone had an unusual change." Li Yun put Shuikeng on the table. Shuikeng's body temperature was so extremely high, that Li Yun's sleeves

and hands had been burned black. As soon as she touched the table, a hissing sound could be heard. The jar of cool liquor immediately started boiling.

Li Yun moved the liquor to the windowsill with a wave of his hand and withdrew his hands to blow on them, saying, “So it’s not my fault that she couldn’t turn back all this time.”

Shuikeng sprawled on the table with a dead look, like a magnificent roast chicken, and said, “Shixiong, I’m dying.”

Then this dying one turned her head and happened to see the snacks that Yan Zhengming had tossed aside earlier. So she craned her neck to peck at it, leaving a hole, and said while eating, “Even if I’m dying, I have to die with a full stomach.”

Cheng Qian, “...”

He realized that Da-shixiong really had quite some skill in raising children, and was especially good at suiting his education according to the child in question. He had completely retained Shimei’s authentic bird aura.

At the moment, the sky outside had turned extremely dark. The few guests of the inn had all gotten up, anxiously looking out. Cheng Qian looked out and saw that there seemed to be a black dragon amid the dark clouds — this wasn’t an old fogey that had died for eight thousand years like the one in the Great Dragon’s Banner. The gigantic pressure whistled forth with the worrying demonic aura, enveloping the skies that had changed.

Right then, Shuikeng’s body suddenly produced a crisp sound. The wings that were originally half as tall as a person suddenly spread out, flames sparking from her body. The wooden table was immediately burned.

Yan Zhengming's long sleeves fluttered. The intimidating sword aura of a sword cultivator spread out like a dome, completely encasing the entire room. Li Yun produced a pouch of cinnabar from his bosom, picked up the Osmanthus-flower liquor on the windowsill, and spread it out. His entire person had almost turned into a shadow as circles upon circles of fiery red charms formed on the floor.

Cheng Qian was originally about to say 'This place isn't good to stay in, can we leave', but upon seeing this scene, he swallowed these unnecessary words. He grabbed Shuangren and leapt up to the eaves, standing guard outside.

A few gigantic tremors came from underfoot. The power of a Heavenly *Yao* was constantly looking for a way to break through, but was suppressed by Yan Zhengming.

Each time Shuikeng's *yao* bone grew, the two of them seemed like they were gambling with their lives. Even though Yan Zhengming had been making rapid progress these past years, Shuikeng's Heavenly *Yao* power grew at an even more insane rate. At the moment, the long feathers on her back had been sliced by the sword aura, but the fierce purifying flames of samadhi was spreading out of her control, that even Cheng Qian could feel it outside the circle of sword aura.

Cheng Qian could feel a scorching pain on his back. Compared to the restrained heat of the Scarlet Bird Tower, the flames on Shuikeng's body seemed more violent.

Suddenly, the swift and fierce cry of a bird came from behind him. A red glow broke through the roof and burst toward the horizon, cutting a gap amid the dark clouds, as if a target had been set beyond a thousand *li*.

The black dragon in the distance abruptly turned its head, its eyes meeting Cheng Qian. Cheng Qian's hair stood on end and he couldn't help tightening his grip on his sword — he couldn't remember the last time he'd had this feeling.

Suddenly, someone said in a low voice not too far away, "The Phoenix rears nine young... She's a Vermilion Crane [1]?"

This voice was extremely familiar. Cheng Qian abruptly turned around and said in surprise, "Tang-xiong? Why are you here?"

The newcomer was none other than Tang Zhen. Maybe it was because of the dark clouds, but Tang Zhen's complexion looked even worse, like someone who was at death's door.

Two young men stood behind him on both sides, carefully supporting him. One was Nian Mingming's talkative dear son Nian Dada, the other was Liulang, whose soul Cheng Qian had nailed in place not too long ago.

Tang Zhen didn't exchange pleasantries with him. He only looked at the approaching black dragon, speaking weakly, "Among the three thousand paths of demonic cultivation, one is the rarest of all, which is entering the Dao through xinmo. With their body as the xinmo's tool, if they were successful, they could obtain the all-conquering power of gathering all the xinmo under the heavens to form a demonic dragon. However, xinmo is harmful to others and the self. It's also the first time I'm learning that someone could reach this level — Xiaoyou, you need to be careful. The Heavenly Vermilion Crane *Yao*'s bone happened to be suitable for the demonic dragon's spine."

As they spoke, the black dragon had reached them. Ordinary mortals and cultivators were both but ants before it, all of them had long since run for their lives, screams sounding everywhere.

The dragon's cry fell like a lightning strike, the quake causing them to lose their balance. A loud sound was heard — other than the restaurant under Cheng Qian's feet, all the buildings and trees around them had fallen apart in an instant.

Cheng Qian, "Out of the way!"

Shuangren flew out of its sheath, the cold frosty aura spreading around them like water ripples. Even from the distance, one could hear the thrum that seemed to have come from the strings of a guqin.

In the humid and hot air, each drop of water seemed to have been squeezed out. The cold frost had covered the entire building in the blink of an eye. Cheng Qian stood on the roof, holding Shuangren in his hand. One could almost see the same unyielding nature that he had shown meeting challenges directly from all those years ago.

The white frost sweeping forward clashed with the dark clouds.

There was a loud 'bang' —

Extreme brightness and extreme darkness clashed in an unavoidable confrontation. The two stone guardian lions at the entrance of the restaurant were brushed by the force of the confrontation and were instantly reduced to dust. The metallic ring of Shuangren was sharp, the black dragon curled about in the air.

In the instant that the two clashed at close quarters, Tang Zhen had thrown out a stone with five colors, which turned into a dome, encasing the three of them within. When the intense light had passed, a crack was clearly left on the dome.

This was what the saying ‘stones are split, the heavens are startled’ meant

Nian Dada was so startled he was stammering, “Tang... Tang... This, this was the Five-Colored Stone that the Goddess Nuwa had... left in the mortal world...”

Tang Zhen didn’t seem to particularly care about this, only saying mildly, “It’s just a leftover object, how could it withstand a demonic dragon’s attack? The demonic dragon is almost fully formed, this demon lord already qualifies to claim the title of Beiming.”

Nian Dada’s eyes widened so far they seemed about to fall out. “He can become Lord Beiming!”

“He can’t.” Tang Zhen said, “In the demonic path, winners rule, while losers are cast out. To claim the title of Beiming, one must pave the way with the previous Lord Beiming’s corpse. The previous Lord Beiming only had one immortal soul left, which was sealed by a... uh, very outstanding fellow cultivator with his own primordial spirit. This way, he was neither alive nor dead, so the title ‘Lord Beiming’ is forever sealed, and nobody can claim it anymore.”

Nian Dada wasn’t in the mood to listen to his legends and asked nervously, “That Cheng Shishu of mine is only a hundred years old, how can he beat the lord of the demons?”

Liulang had been silent all this time, but when he heard this, the hand holding Tang Zhen up couldn’t help tightening.

Tang Zhen said nothing, only looking up — Cheng Qian’s entire body swayed on the roof. A part of Shuangren had been tainted with the dark aura. He looked at the sword in his hand and lifted his sleeve to wipe the

bloodstain at the corners of his lips, unyieldingly staring at the black dragon in the air.

One claw of the black dragon was easily three times Cheng Qian's size. As it pressed forward steadily toward him, Cheng Qian leapt up to meet it in the air, gathering the tide-like cold frost around him. A strike of 'Do or Die' from 'Backfire' contained an extremely precise sword aura, cutting straight into the black dragon's claw.

Tang Zhen patted Liulang's hand, saying in a low voice, "Stop entertaining groundless fears, he's a blade that had been forged through Heavenly Tribulations."

[1] '*Vermilion Crane*' The word used here is . It's one of the descendants of the Phoenix.

Feeling the pain, the black dragon produced a long hiss, the earth-shaking force distorting the entire sky. Thick dark clouds fell like pouring rain. The places that it touched seemed to have been struck by a plague, none of the plants could stay alive. In an instant, not a single blade of grass remained. The falling dark clouds seemed to have ‘swallowed’ Cheng Qian whole.

Nian Dada, the bumpkin cultivator who had never seen much of the world, exclaimed in surprise and didn’t even dare to look. But Liulang abruptly stepped forward, about to leave the Five-Colored Stone’s protection range, but was pulled back by Tang Zhen.

Liulang’s disfigured face was covered with a mask. The young face that he’d had when he first came to the Mingming Valley was long gone. His voice was low and hoarse like grating steel, a painful sound, “Senior, I...”

Tang Zhen spoke with an indescribable coldness, “You’ve only memorized some elementary level cultivation methods, you don’t even have any energy feel, how are you any different from those birds and bugs? Is there even any place for you to step in?”

Liulang spoke solemnly, “Senior Cheng had saved my life, I must show my courage and repay his kindness.”

Tang Zhen said mercilessly, “That courage of yours is only enough to stuff a gap between that demon’s teeth. What use would he have for it?”

Liulang’s fists tightened abruptly.

Without even looking at him, Tang Zhen said mildly, “There are countless difficulties in the search for the Dao, one’s life is always on the line. Be it kindness or revenge, you need to have the skill and ability in order to repay them. What good would it be to just say them out loud?”

Liulang, “But...”

Tang Zhen didn’t seem the slightest bit worried about Cheng Qian, only saying, “Just look.”

Cheng Qian was swallowed by the black mist and couldn’t find a way out for some time. He could only feel that his core was confined in the sea of energy around him. His breath was stuck in his chest, and he almost fell from the air.

His heart, which had remained calm for so many years, was disturbed by the dark mist filled with demonic energy. In that moment, the helplessness that he had felt in his youth, the ups and downs in his life, the meetings and partings, and the heartrending pain within the Spirit-Condensing Jade all seemed to have fallen upon him again. A voice in his heart seemed to be questioning him: *Do you really hold no resentment?*

He had held onto his resentment toward his birth parents until his death, he could recognize Zhou Hanzheng just from seeing his eyes. All of the neglect that he had experienced in his life was kept in his heart. He had never been able to put down grudges, could he really become so enlightened suddenly and forget all about the past?

Did he really hold no resentment towards the hand that Han Yuan had put through his heart?

That was a matter that even the most broad-minded Da-shixiong couldn’t overlook, much less the ever-petty Cheng Qian. All these years had passed

so peacefully, was it because he had turned over a new leaf and didn't hold the slightest grudge, or... was he just taking advantage of the detachment created by Tang Zhen removing his memories for forty-nine years, and purposefully putting it out of his mind?

The hazy black mist gathered in front of his eyes, turning into Han Yuan's form. That Han Yuan looked at him and gave a light smile. "Little Shixiong, you've always been good at deceiving yourself and others, are you finally admitting the truth now?"

The corner of Cheng Qian's eyes twitched slightly. For a moment, he couldn't tell if this was the xinmo that the black mist had produced, he could only feel like an opening had been cut into his ever-invulnerable mental state. Then, following this small opening, everything collapsed.

Han Yuan stared at him darkly and said, "Little Shixiong, you didn't use to be so hypocritical. If you hated someone, you wouldn't ever show them a kind face, why don't you even dare to speak up about your resentment now? What are you so scared of? Conflict in the sect? Hang-ups within Shixiong's heart? Or are you scared of showing your pettiness, ruining the image that you had shown the outside world?"

"Shut up," Cheng Qian cut him off coldly, "What right do you have to question me? Aren't you the one to have made the move all those years ago? Even if you had been affected by Soul-Painting back then, aren't you the one who had fallen into the demonic path and committed heinous sins these past years? You still have the face to lament your misfortune?"

Han Yuan didn't seem to expect him retorting so bluntly, and was stunned for a moment.

Cheng Qian's anger flared without warning. He clenched his teeth and forcibly put his stagnated energy back into motion, ignoring the tremendous

pain in his chest. He allowed his energy to run rampant in his meridians, completely sweeping away the demonic aura around him.

In this world, other than the cage that he had created for himself, was there anything that could still restrain him?

Without using Shuangren, Cheng Qian raised his hand and landed a strike on Han Yuan's face, exclaiming angrily, "Do you think I can't blame it on you?"

A loud slap was heard. Both the assailant and the victim were stunned.

Cheng Qian originally thought that the person in front of him was the manifestation of his xinmo, not a solid thing, and had struck in a moment's fury. He didn't think that he would come in contact with a concrete object.

Amid the lightning and flying rocks, he recalled Tang Zhen's words of 'using their body as the xinmo's tool' and 'cultivating their xinmo into a dragon'. His eyes widened and he said in disbelief, "You really are... Han Yuan?"

Holding his own face, Han Yuan first looked dumbfounded, but then he broke out laughing, "Little Shixiong, even though you were the one who was wronged, you're so absent-minded. You can't even recognize the culprit standing right in front of you?"

Cheng Qian's hand seemed to tremble as it held Shuangren. "So the person who had broken into the Scarlet Bird Tower was you, the demonic dragon is you, and the one who wants Shimei's *yao* bone is also..."

Han Yuan held his hands behind his back, saying lightly, "The bone of a Heavenly *Yao* is ominous, what good would it bring leaving it in her body, other than causing her to suffer every few years? It would be better to

remove that ominous thing and give it to me, an ominous person. Considering our past relationship as sect allies, I could be less forceful while extracting the bone and spare her life.”

Cheng Qian could feel something surging like tidal waves inside him. A gloomy chill seeped out of his limbs. Then his aura broke through the demonic energy surrounding him as he squeezed out in between clenched teeth, “Why don’t you ask and see if I’ll spare your life!”

Before he even finished speaking, Shuangren’s sword glare spread out explosively, entirely clearing the surrounding dark aura. Even Han Yuan, who had turned into a demonic dragon, couldn’t help retreating temporarily. He took on the dragon’s form and flew straight toward the heavens.

The all-consuming darkness was torn apart by a blinding sword glare. Cheng Qian’s figure reappeared in the night sky, his sword cutting toward the dragon’s body. With the faint rumbling of thunder in the air, it seemed like he had the power to slay a dragon.

Both man and dragon disappeared above the clouds. They were so closely tangled in battle that their figures couldn’t even be seen.

“Stand farther away.” Tang Zhen pulled Liulang back, shaking his head, “There’s such a fierce fight outside, and a Heavenly *Yao* is kicking up a fuss inside. This place can’t hold on for long, it’s definitely going to fall apart.”

It seemed like Tang Zhen’s mouth was incredibly successful at speaking misfortunes into existence. Before he even finished speaking, a loud sound was heard, and the inn had collapsed.

Before the dust could even rise, it had turned into a red cloud. The gigantic Vermilion Crane’s full figure was exposed, its *yao* aura contained within the

cinnabar array by a single sword cultivator, its bones producing crackling sounds.

Nian Dada was stupefied, “This... This is a Vermilion Crane. So it’s quite difficult being a bird, too.”

Tang Zhen took half a step back, looked at Shuikeng for a moment, and said with a frown, “The Heavenly *Yao* has always been birthed following a Tribulation, and would carry a bloody aura from its birth. But in her case, even though she had answered to the fate of a Heavenly *Yao*, she still had half the blood of a human. She should’ve been born in bloodbath, but her fate had been changed by force... For her to grow up so big without any mishap, with her *yao* aura suppressed for the most part, is truly quite a feat.”

Hearing this, admiration entered the gaze Nian Dada had turned toward Yan Zhengming.

Tang Zhen, “Alright, I’ll lend him a hand.”

When he finished speaking, he reached out and seemed to wave casually in the air. A gust of energy gathered in the palm of his hand, like the life-giving spring breeze and rain, and entered the cinnabar array.

Li Yun’s array had been hastily put together to begin with, and had been broken quite a few times by the *yao* energy of the Vermilion Crane. As time passed, it became more and more difficult to maintain. But through Tang Zhen’s fixing, it seemed to have been awakened, emitting a faint glistening glow.

Countless vines crept up from the arrays, repeatedly being burned off by the scorching flames on the great bird’s body, but they kept appearing one after another.

In an instant, Yan Zhengming's burden was lessened considerably. He turned his head to Tang Zhen and gave a solemn nod.

But Tang Zhen didn't have the space of mind to exchange pleasantries with him. He only looked at Shuikeng in the arrays, his expression turning serious as he spoke in a low voice, "Why did it have to be now of all times..."

The Vermilion Crane's body suddenly expanded. Before Yan Zhengming could relax, he felt his own sword aura receiving backlash from the *yao* energy and was forced back three steps. Before he could remedy it, the cinnabar array had shattered.

Li Yun was sent flying entirely. He called out, "Han Tan!"

Another crack instantly appeared on the Five-Colored Stone's dome. Nian Dada pointed at it, yelling in panic, "Senior, what is it this time?"

Tang Zhen said, "The Vermilion Crane is the descendant of the Phoenix. Though it couldn't be rebirthed in fire, it had to remould its body many times throughout its life. It's just like a person reaching the next level of cultivation after having an epiphany. It should've been a fortunate opportunity, but if it's right now, it might not necessarily be... This is bad, a Heavenly Tribulation has been summoned."

Amid the dark mist in the sky, thick clouds gathered from all directions. Through the Five-Colored Stone, Nian Dada could feel his hairs standing on end. In the past, whenever Cheng Qian was going through the Heavenly Tribulations, nobody dared to come anywhere near, so this was his first time seeing a Heavenly Tribulation from up close.

Thunder rumbled within the dark clouds for a moment, then a blinding strike of lightning fell. Yan Zhengming instantly joined his primordial spirit

sword with the sword he always carried with him, and received the first Lightning Tribulation in Shuikeng's place.

With the heavens as the gong and the earth as the drum, the lightning and the sword produced a loud booming sound, painting the heavens a ghastly white.

All these years, Yan Zhengming had still been using the same sword from back on the uninhabited island, the one that Zhou Hanzheng had cut into. He had always carried it to remember the shame that he had endured, never replacing it. He never thought that it would break right then, under the Lightning Tribulation.

Pain erupted in his chest as his primordial spirit sword took heavy damage. If he hadn't broken past the level of Point-break, this primordial spirit sword of his would've been ruined just like that. But before he could catch his breath, the second Lightning Tribulation was already building up.

Right then, the red cloud around Shuikeng seemed to have been pulled into the air, forming a pillar. It burst straight toward the heavens, connecting with the black mist covering the entire sky.

Yao and demons enhance each other. The entire land shifted as the second Lightning Tribulation fell, seemingly carrying the wrath of the heavens and the earth.

Amid the raging winds and furious thunder, blades flashed, the demonic dragon roared, the celestial bird cried. The raging fire on the Heavenly *Yao* seemed like it was going to reduce the long night to ashes. The great mountains of Nanjiang trembled, the barrier of the Five-Colored Stone instantly shattered to pieces...

Somewhere within, there was a frightened cry of ‘Shixiong’. It was a faint voice, like an adolescent young girl’s.

It was so weak... just like the cry of a small ant amid surging waves.

Nobody knew which Shixiong she was calling out to, but she had unmistakably reached everyone who was meant to hear it.

The black dragon’s movement abruptly slowed. It violently turned its head upward, as if experiencing great pain. Its gigantic form flickered a few times in the boundless night sky, then shrunk into a person’s figure, exposing his back to Cheng Qian without a qualm.

Cheng Qian’s gaze hardened. Shuangren changed directions with only a hair’s breadth to spare, brushing past Han Yuan’s human form.

The next moment, Han Yuan extended a ghastly white hand, grabbing the black mist insistently entangling with the red cloud, while Shuangren took on the Lightning Tribulation in the air.

Cheng Qian was extremely experienced in dealing with Heavenly Tribulations. Now that he had Shuangren in his hands, he was further strengthened.

The falling lightning was cut off midway and spread along the blade. It looked like the sword in his hand was connected to the gigantic tail-end of a shooting star.

Cheng Qian’s face was illuminated by the intense light.

On the side, Han Yuan opened his mouth with a soundless call of ‘Little Shixiong’.

Cheng Qian swept his eyes toward him. His gaze was cold, just like the expression that he had shown so many years ago on the shore of the East Sea, when he was sprawled on Han Yuan's back and swearing to tell on him to Shifu.

Han Yuan clenched his teeth, almost bursting into tears from his glare.

Right then, thousands of blades rose from the ground. Yan Zhengming's sword had broken, so amid the flying rocks, he turned the wind and rain around him into his blades, forming a disorderly yet invulnerable gigantic blade. It severed the connection between the Vermilion Crane's red cloud and the demonic dragon's black mist with one strike.

Immediately afterward, the boundless sword aura split the heavens and the earth, suppressing the sky high *yao* energy. Without hurting Shuikeng, it slowly pushed the ominous red cloud back towards the ground, forcing it back to a three *zhang* radius around her.

Then ten charms flew out from Li Yun's hands in quick succession. Each time one of the charms fell on Shuikeng's head, the flames on her body receded. After the ten charms had connected, the Vermilion Crane finally turned into a young girl with wings on her back, curled up on the ground, completely unconscious.

At last, the rumbling thunder went away begrudgingly.

Han Yuan showed a slightly relieved expression, but the next moment, his expression shifted without warning. His arm turned into a claw full of dragon scales, striking out toward Cheng Qian's back.

As soon as the atmosphere changed, Cheng Qian had reacted even before the wind's roars returned, and turned his sword. Shuangren still carried the

remnants of lightning and flames from taking on the Heavenly Tribulation earlier. When it collided with the dragon's claw, sparks flew everywhere.

Faint dragon scales flickered on Han Yuan's face. He was about to say something, but the sound of a horn was heard in the distance.

That horn's sound was even more drawn-out and resonant than a normal military horn. The hollow sound resounded lowly, seemingly carrying the overwhelming might of thousands upon thousands of men and horses. Han Yuan's face twitched, expression shifting slightly. Then he gave a sinister smile, "Wow, we've summoned the dogs. Little Shixiong, I'll have to leave now."

After that, he pushed Shuangren away violently. His nails scraping on the blade produced a painful screeching sound. Han Yuan brushed past him to leave, but Cheng Qian's sword stubbornly chased after him. With a clang, the blade and the dragon's claws collided again.

Cheng Qian enunciated each word clearly as he asked, "Entering the Dao through xinmo, what is your xinmo?"

Han Yuan's expression abruptly changed. With a turn of his hand, he gathered a black cloud in his palm and shoved it into Cheng Qian's chest.

Cheng Qian was caught off guard, so he was forced back more than one *zhang* by the demonic energy.

With that short exchange, Han Yuan had turned into the demonic dragon again, moving out beyond a half *li*.

"Instead of asking about my xinmo," the gigantic dragon turned its head around, Han Yuan's face flickering on it, a taunting and malicious smile on

his face, “why don’t you ask what the sect leader’s xinmo is — that is, if you dare to hear the answer.”

When he finished speaking, the demonic dragon went north, dark clouds filling the skies.

Whistles came from where that horn seemed to have sounded. Then, a few beams of light shot into the sky from different directions. It seemed like some people were using signals to communicate with each other. Li Yun came forward and placed his hand on Shuikeng’s wings, retracting these wings of hers that were like large target marks. He uncomplainingly carried her on his back, asking, “What’s happening, who’s coming?”

Cheng Qian came down from the air. The bloodstains on his body hadn’t been wiped off, and he stumbled a little. Yan Zhengming caught him, scolding in a low voice, “Slow down.”

Nian Dada was just about to come forward and greet him, but Tang Zhen cut him off.

Tang Zhen said, “Save the pleasantries for later — that was the Yin-Yang signal and the Seven-Colored Flames, it’s the people from the Office of Heavenly Affairs. Meeting them might cause problems, come with me for now.”

Li Yun turned to Yan Zhengming. Cheng Qian hurriedly made the introductions, “I forgot to say, this is Tang-xiong — Tang Zhen.”

Hearing this, Yan Zhengming immediately said, “Many thanks to this fellow cultivator, let’s go!”

The group quickly left the place following Tang Zhen’s lead. They were extremely fast — in just a few moments, they had gone beyond tens of *li*.

With the familiarity of someone who was used to being on the run, Tang Zhen brought them to a rundown temple. He didn't dare to rest so quickly, so he borrowed Li Yun's cinnabar to set up an array around the rundown temple.

Tang Zhen was very knowledgeable and skilled, it was evident that he had dabbled in the art of arrays for years. Only half an incense stick had been burned when the rundown temple became completely hidden.

Li Yun put Shuikeng down and came forward to help, eager for a taste of knowledge. Cheng Qian and Yan Zhengming each stood on one side of the door to stand guard and regulate their breathing.

This year's Mid-Autumn couldn't possibly be more chaotic.

Right then, Cheng Qian suddenly asked without warning, "Da-shixiong, what was your xinmo that was brought out in the Scarlet Bird Tower that day?"

Before Yan Zhengming could deal with the wounds on his body, he suddenly received such a shock. He immediately choked on his breath and started coughing like he was dying.

Cheng Qian solemnly watched his ‘weeping beauty [1]’ Da-shixiong, who seemed about to puke blood. He didn’t think this was the kind of matter to be kept secret, so he said, “Han Yuan told me, I wouldn’t dare to hear what your xinmo is. I’ve thought about it earlier, and I don’t think there’s anything that I wouldn’t dare to hear. Even if you intend to dishonor our master or exterminate our ancestors in betrayal, we don’t have any master or ancestors left for you to disgrace. Just say it, maybe you’ll feel better after saying it out loud.”

What a truly adorable simpleton...

After hearing his fully justified and reasonable words, Yan Zhengming immediately felt his own intolerance growing. He silently looked at Cheng Qian with a troubled look, staring at his pure and honest expression, and weakly waved his hand. “Scram.”

The sweet words and honeyed phrases he had imagined really were just his imagination. Yan Zhengming realized that in the cruel reality, the word that he spoke to Cheng Qian most seemed to be ‘scram’.

Cheng Qian frowned slightly. He didn’t understand where the bad mood was coming from this time, so he contained his own emotions and very patiently tried to make peace, “Da-shixiong, even mortals, who are

occupied with their day-to-day lives, would have moments where they fret over trifles, let alone people on the endless path of cultivation. Momentarily fixating on something is nothing, really.”

“It is nothing, there’s nothing to begin with, did I say there’s anything?” Plagued by guilt, Yan Zhengming was shamed into anger and snapped at Cheng Qian three times. Immediately after, since he himself could feel that this outburst of his was completely unreasonable, he simply decided to dig a deeper hole for himself and said, “I’m not telling you, get lost!”

Cheng Qian, “...”

As that oblivious gaze stared at him, Yan Zhengming’s anger flared higher. He stared at Cheng Qian for a while, internally imagining himself grabbing Cheng Qian by the back of his head, then yelling with full fervor in his ears, *What are you asking for, my xinmo is you, bastard.*

Unfortunately, he only dared to think about things like this internally. On the outside, Yan Zhengming remained unmoving like ice, but his heart was jumping around like a big monkey.

At last, he smacked the big monkey to death and turned away completely rationally, pulling an ‘out of sight, out of mind’ on Cheng Qian.

After an extremely short night chat and an extremely long battle, Yan Zhengming was going to continue his cold war.

Cheng Qian was silent for a moment, then he suddenly smiled. “Alright then, I won’t ask anymore. You seem alright, in any case.”

Yan Zhengming glanced at him.

Cheng Qian said, “Since you’re so good at keeping yourself entertained...”

Seeing the brewing storm on the sect leader’s face, as if he was about to whip out a stick to beat him, Cheng Qian finally learned to be tactful for once in his life.

While sighing about the Niangniang turning even more temperamental, hence more difficult to keep in good humor, he procured a small, thin rod from his sleeve. When he opened his palm, the small rod expanded in size and volume, turning into a sword bedecked with gold and jade — it was the sword that Valley Lord Nian Mingming had gifted him before his departure.

Cheng Qian handed the sword over to Yan Zhengming, speaking with barely noticeable hints of ingratiation, “Didn’t your sword break earlier? Use this one for now. Even though it’s not pleasant to the eyes, the sword is of good quality. I’ll find a better one for you when we go back.”

Upon giving it a glance, Yan Zhengming immediately ducked aside with great disdain. “Get it away from me, how unsightly.”

It really was a bit unsightly... After suffering such disdain, Cheng Qian scratched his nose, but wasn’t particularly deterred — his Da-shixiong had been a fop for so many years, he had long since cultivated himself into a high-level fop. It was normal for him to turn up his nose at this gaudy thing.

Cheng Qian smiled. “How about I give you Shuangren.”

Yan Zhengming was stunned by those words. No sword practitioner could resist being attracted by this frosty treasured sword, even if it carried the infamous reputation of ‘Sword of Miserable Death’. But Yan Zhengming didn’t particularly have much feelings for it, because all these years, he had looked upon this sword to recall its owner. As time passed, whenever he saw Shuangren, his heart would ache instead of be moved.

Yan Zhengming stared at Cheng Qian with a peculiar gaze. “You can even bear to give me Shuangren?”

Without another word, Cheng Qian tossed Shuangren into his arms. “Take it.”

Yan Zhengming pulled the sheath, the chill from the blade wafting toward him. His irritation immediately went away, the corners of his lips subconsciously curling upward. But before his smile could unfurl completely, Yan Zhengming was reminded of the way Cheng Qian had wielded Shuangren back then, how the sword had seemed tied to Cheng Qian’s very life.

He couldn’t help thinking absently, *Could he really give me anything, no matter what I ask of him?*

As soon as this bittersweet thought flashed in his mind, Yan Zhengming’s gaze dimmed again.

Yan Zhengming had entered the Sect Leader’s Seal quite a few times, and had seen Tong Ru’s fate. He had extremely complicated feelings regarding this Shizu of his, who had fallen into the wrong path by accident. Especially after sensing that he seemed to harbor some inappropriate feelings toward Shifu. On one hand, Yan Zhengming had a subtle feeling of commiseration over the same suffering toward Tong Ru. But on the other hand, he had projected his own self-hatred onto Tong Ru. Even though he knew that he was venting his anger on his predecessor for no reason, he had no idea how to stop himself from doing so.

If Cheng Qian were his senior or older than him, Yan Zhengming’s burden would’ve been much lighter. His intentions were pure, but in that circumstance, he would think that he was being rebellious, at best. Maybe he would’ve been able to willfully act clingy toward Cheng Qian. If he

were to be cast out of the sect, it would be even better, because he would no longer have any misgivings no matter what he did.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the way things were. Cheng Qian was the Shidi that he had raised since childhood. With just a slight switch of their statuses, everything was different. Even the purest intentions had become thoughts that he never should've harbored. As the sect leader, if he were to really lead his Shidi astray, any sincerity would become shameful, any deep feelings would become inappropriate and uncouth.

Do I deserve it? Yan Zhengming bitterly asked himself. He returned Shuangren to Cheng Qian without a word, saw that Tang Zhen's bunch had finished with the arrays around the perimeter, and silently stood to enter the rundown temple.

Cheng Qian, who had been left in place, felt like his head could explode. It seemed as if cheering up Da-shixiong had become impossible.

Nian Dada, who had been hiding in the rundown temple, saw Yan Zhengming enter and hurried to greet him eagerly, "Senior!"

Back then, Cheng Qian had left Nian Dada behind and entrusted Liulang's life to him, so Nian Dada was forced to go back to Mingming Valley. He then shamelessly made things up to his father, lying through his teeth with nonsense like 'Elder Cheng is interested in taking me as a disciple, I must follow him to travel and learn', and finally was allowed to leave the Mingming Valley again through great difficulty, becoming Tang Zhen's little footman.

He might be lying to his father, but Nian Dada's intention to become Cheng Qian's disciple really had persisted all along. Especially after seeing the great battle of the Fuyao Sect with his own eyes. His stubbornness had practically become infatuation, so he daringly came forward to pay his

respects to his future Shibo, “This junior is Nian Dada of the Mingming Valley, paying my respects to the Senior.”

Yan Zhengming, who was wallowing in self-hatred, wearily swept a glance to Nian Dada, and formed his first impression of this person.

An obstacle whose father has a few loose screws, he thought.

Nian Dada realized that his future Shibo’s gaze didn’t seem very friendly, completely unlike how Cheng Qian had described him as easygoing, and stubbornly encouraged himself, *Senior masters all have not so good tempers, don’t mind it — keep persevering, and you can shape gold. I, Nian Dada, will definitely become a formidable master one day!*

Yan Zhengming didn’t care to respond to him, so Nian Dada unleashed the same technique he had used to interact with Cheng Qian — if the other person didn’t respond, he’d just keep talking without pause. Starting from how much he worshipped ‘Elder Cheng’, to how he had snuck out of the Valley, secretly following Cheng Qian along the way, how shamelessly he had clung on, and then how he had deliberately stuck himself to Tang Zhen’s side. Yan Zhengming’s eyes kept twitching hearing this, his anger rising out of nowhere — he suspected that this person had untoward intentions for Cheng Qian.

Since his own intentions were dishonorable, he believed everyone under the heavens also had dishonorable intentions. Yan Zhengming halted his steps and quickly turned around. Without any consideration about bullying the weak, he unleashed his might as a sword cultivator and indiscriminately questioned, “What are you plotting against my Shidi?”

Nian Dada, “...”

He wanted to explain his true intentions, that he would definitely work to improve himself so he could fulfill his filial piety. Unfortunately, he was suppressed so much that he couldn't even raise his head. His buttcheeks trembled, and he couldn't speak a single word.

Yan Zhengming, "Speak!"

Nian Dada was internally crying a sea of tears. This was his first time meeting a breathing sword cultivator, but he didn't think he wanted to meet a second one — sword cultivators are truly way too scary!

The stir over here finally reached Li Yun, who was conversing with Tang Zhen. Li Yun internally sighed 'how embarrassing' and quickly went forward to pull back his Da-shixiong, who had almost scared the young cultivator into wetting his pants, while comforting Nian Dada, "The sect has quite a lot of troublesome things, so the sect leader has a bad temper. Young Master Nian, don't be offended."

At the same time, he wearily pulled Yan Zhengming aside, "What are you losing your mind for?"

When Li Yun pulled at him, Yan Zhengming immediately came back to himself and also realized that he had overreacted. He opened his mouth, at a loss for a moment.

As Li Yun looked at his expression, he suddenly became alarmed. Da-shixiong had always favored Cheng Qian since they were young. Added with how Cheng Qian had gone missing for so many years, Da-shixiong had basically been cradling him in his hands after his return. Even though Li Yun often teased him about it, he was mostly joking, and had never thought about it seriously.

Li Yun, "You..."

Yan Zhengming didn't want to speak anymore, so he turned around and put on a nonchalant face. As if running away from something, he came up to Tang Zhen. "I've already heard from Xiao-Qian. Senior Tang, we can't possibly repay your kindness for saving our lives."

The two of them quickly started exchanging pleasantries. When interacting with outsiders, Yan Zhengming had always been very good at putting on the airs of a sect leader. He was extremely skilled at putting on different faces for different people. If he wanted to, he could make it so others couldn't see any trace of his usual fussy behavior in the sect.

In front of an outsider, Li Yun pushed down the disorderly suspicions in his heart and asked Tang Zhen, "Tang Daoyou has come all the way here to Nanjiang, do you have any urgent business to attend to? Could we possibly offer our help?"

Tang Zhen said without any misgivings, "I'm sure you've heard about me from Cheng Qian Xiaoyou. My body has passed, but my soul hasn't dispersed. My primordial spirit hasn't had a place to go all this time, and I'd rather not stoop down to the evil path of body possession, so I could only look for newly passed mortals' bodies as the base and bring them back to cultivate as my own puppet body. Puppet bodies can't last for too long, and suitable bodies aren't so easy to come by. The mortal world had fallen into war the past few years, and I had gathered up quite a bit of bodies. Corpses are difficult to preserve for a long time, so I've come to Nanjiang in search of an Icy Fire. I never thought that I'd happen upon a flood dragon turning into a dragon."

After a pause, Tang Zhen gave a slightly bitter smile, "Thinking back, I'd had the chance to meet with Han Yuan Daoyou from your sect once. At the time, he was still a child with no energy feel. The turns of the world these past years are truly..."

Yan Zhengming was silent for a moment and said, “That rebel had been unskilled back then, and had fallen for a scoundrel’s Soul Painting. Then something must’ve happened, so he now has two souls in his body, half of it occupied by a demonic thing — it’s a shame to admit, but his own soul is suppressed by that demon. If it weren’t for my Shimei momentarily waking him, none of us would’ve gotten away unscathed, facing both the demonic dragon and the Heavenly Tribulation.”

The people present weren’t stupid, all of them could tell he was defending Han Yuan. Yan Zhengming had completely pushed all the heinous things Han Yuan had done onto the ‘unknown demon occupying his body’. It seemed he was still planning to take Han Yuan back into the sect.

Even though Tang Zhen and Tang Wanqiu came from the same sect, their personalities were polar opposites of each other. Tang Zhen was very sensitive to emotional matters. As soon as Yan Zhengming opened his mouth, he was already well aware of his thoughts. “Oh? There’s this kind of reason? But if that’s the case, I have some ways to solve the problem. This humble one is no good in other things, but I’ve been dabbling with the path of souls for a long time.”

Li Yun immediately said, “Please tell us more.”

Tang Zhen, “With two souls in one body, I’m sure you all want to keep one and remove the other, you’re only hesitating out of fear of harming the innocent, aren’t you? I have something in my possession, called the ‘Soul-Pulling Thread’. It can draw a person’s primordial spirit into another body. You will only need to think of a way to keep your sect disciple’s primordial spirit and remove that demonic thing.”

Yan Zhengming was only exchanging pleasantries with him at first, but hearing this, his heart couldn’t help stirring. He carefully pushed down the

urgent feeling in his heart and said courteously, “The people of our sect have been in Tang-xiong’s favor, it truly is...”

Tang Zhen wasn’t someone who would speak thoughtlessly, he wouldn’t have said anything without any reason. At that moment, he had spoken up, so he was intending to use this favor in exchange for help.

Cheng Qian, who had entered at some point, spoke up after hearing this, “Nanjiang has been in unrest recently. It would be dangerous for you to go with these two children, and my Shixiong’s group still had to go after Shishidi... How about this, if you don’t find me bothersome, I’ll come with you to find that Icy Fire.”

Cheng Qian wasn’t bothersome at all — the Scarlet Bird Tower had collapsed, and the demonic dragon had just been birthed. At the moment, all the demonic cultivators and various powerful influences of Nanjiang were in unrest. Tang Zhen might be knowledgeable, but his physical body was a sickly person. As for the two people with him — Liulang was only sixteen years old, he hadn’t even learned the basics of cultivating. Nian Dada couldn’t even tell which way was north, he couldn’t possibly be counted on. If Cheng Qian was willing to escort them, it definitely would be most welcome for Tang Zhen.

Cheng Qian was using this chance to return the favor for the sect.

Upon hearing those decisive words, Yan Zhengming’s first reaction was objection. He definitely didn’t want to let Cheng Qian leave his sight again. But when his words of objection reached his tongue, he swallowed them back.

Could I possibly keep him tied to my side forever? Yan Zhengming silently thought back to count the stupid things he’d done and the wicked thoughts

he'd had recently, and suddenly felt that letting Cheng Qian leave for a while might be a good idea.

Cheng Qian was always collected in handling things, he rarely kicked up trouble himself. Moreover, his cultivation was now on a whole other level...

Yan Zhengming's hesitation only showed briefly, but Tang Zhen had caught it.

Tang Zhen tactfully said with a smile, "Cheng Xiaoyou, no need to be like that. You're too courteous toward people, it feels alienating — if we must say, I've had a long relationship with your Fuyao Sect. When I was young and thoughtless, I once went to travel around with a Shimei from the same sect. On the way, I encountered some trouble and almost lost my life. Fortunately, Senior Tong Ru from your sect had helped me, and I had spent some time recovering on the Fuyao Mountain. I was even acquainted with your master. Now, it would be difficult to say who is repaying whose favor. My abilities are limited, all that I've done to help you aren't difficult in the slightest, so there's no need for compensation."

After letting his imagination run wild earlier, Li Yun's palms were covered in sweat. He looked at Yan Zhengming with slight nervousness, as if the thing they were discussing wasn't the trivial matter of Cheng Qian escorting Tang Zhen, but Da-shixiong's major matters of principle.

Yan Zhengming raised his eyes and met his gaze. His heart sunk slightly, as if his body had been filled with acid.

Finally, he lowered his eyes, avoiding everyone else's gazes, and said, "Xiao-Qian has been under Tang Daoyou's care for so long, it's only right for him to run some errands for you. If Tang Daoyou considers this sword in his hand worthy, wouldn't it be better for you to not decline?"

Since he had said so, it would be senseless of Tang Zhen to refuse. The group all rested on their own in the rundown temple. After three days, Shuikeng finally woke up. Tang Zhen couldn't bear to stay much longer, so before Cheng Qian could see whether Shuikeng had undergone any change, he had set off with Tang Zhen's group.

Yan Zhengming had so many words of worries filling his chest, but after going through them internally, he felt that all of them were quite misplaced, so he left them to sit inside him. Without a word of nonsense, he waved Cheng Qian away. "Go, then."

On the contrary, Cheng Qian was the one who couldn't stop worrying. He nagged both of his Shixiong and his still slightly listless Shimei, and finally sighed, "If only there's an artifact that can immediately summon me over when you're met with danger."

Yan Zhengming's heart turned into a mess hearing those words. He almost changed his mind right then, and only managed to stop himself using all the willpower from his lifetime. He faked impatience and told Cheng Qian, "Fine, fine, you're the greatest, you need to be everywhere — hurry and scram, don't waste people's time and offend my eyes."

After saying that, Yan Zhengming gathered up his own loneliness, steeled his heart, and turned around first.

In this land under the heavens, was there anywhere that would allow him to have his wish, was there anywhere that would allow him to part with his dreams?

[1] '*weeping beauty*' The phrase used here is , which literally means 'pear blossom bathed in the rain'. It's a common imagery for the tear-stained face of a beauty.

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Cheng Qian watched Yan Zhengming and the others leave, the knit between his brows never loosening.

He had always been the type to only give good news and never bad news. Only when the others' backs were turned would he show any worries.

Wanting to help was definitely one of the reasons Cheng Qian had offered to go with Tang Zhen, but his other reason coincidentally happened to be the same as Yan Zhengming — he intended to part with the sect for some time.

Even though Da-shixiong's attitude was nasty and he refused to cooperate, never loosening his lips no matter what, Cheng Qian could still guess that Yan Zhengming's xinmo must be closely related to him. Otherwise, he couldn't think of anything that Da-shixiong couldn't tell him.

Yet, even though Cheng Qian was quite attentive, his interpersonal skills weren't very good. He was able to guess, but he didn't know what next steps to take, since he couldn't make insinuations or go about things indirectly. He feared that he couldn't handle things properly and accidentally upset Da-shixiong further, so he had thought to leave for a while, leaving his hopes to his Er-shixiong Li Yun, who was lacking in anything but wits.

But Cheng Qian didn't know if Li Yun could be relied on. Before they could go far, he had already started feeling extremely worried.

The heavens must've sent this certain person to bother him, making him experience the taste of 'being together is difficult, but being apart is equally hard'.

Tang Zhen watched calmly from the side and sighed emotionally, "The relationship of your sect members really is worthy of envy."

Cheng Qian came back to himself then. He withdrew his gaze and said, "I've kept you waiting, Tang-xiong, apologies."

Tang Zhen wasn't particularly bothered. "My traveling speed is slow anyways, it's alright."

Nian Dada butted in from the side, "What, do the people in Senior Tang's sect not get along?"

"It's not really a matter of getting along." Tang Zhen's eyes squinted lightly, as if he was recalling something. Loneliness appeared on his face as he said, "The people of the Fuyao Sect value quality over quantity, but our Mulan Mountain was different. Mulan Mountain was too big, there were quite a few elders under the sect leader, each of them occupying their own mountains, taking their own disciples. I had been on the mountain for hundreds of years, but I didn't even know all the elders. Even among the disciples, we'd only meet in events like sect-wide competitions. We didn't even know each other, so there wasn't really any relationship to speak of. As time passed, everyone only spoke through their abilities. The hierarchy is extremely strict, it was cold."

As Tang Zhen spoke, he looked at Cheng Qian. "It's more human and warm at your place. It feels less like a sect, and more like a home."

Nian Dada said, "When the sect gets big, there's a lot of people. When there's a lot of people, the hierarchy becomes strict, people's relationships

become distant too, it can't be helped. But among the sect allies, there has to be one or two people you get along with, right?"

Tang Zhen said, "There really was one Shimei who had grown up with me. She... Her temper wasn't very good after she grew up, but when we were young, we got along quite well."

This was the second time Cheng Qian heard him bring up his Shimei, so he asked, "Could your Shimei's name be Tang Wanqiu?"

"Nn, it's her." Tang Zhen spoke without even turning around, "But 'Shixiong' and 'Shimei' only represents seniority for us. When we were younger, we might be close, but we'd basically just run off to do our own things after growing up. Everyone is just a passing guest on Mulan Mountain. Now, even if she were to stand in front of me, I can't say for sure whether I could still recognize her. I know that all of you have quite some history with her. Now, she is no longer in this world, her actions really have nothing to do with me."

There was a kind of evasive and open aloofness about Tang Zhen. It was hard to tell if that was his character to begin with, or if it was caused by the many years he had spent teetering on the edge of life and death. He never took any disciples or returned to his sect, and rarely even brought up Mulan Mountain, only wandering the lands all by himself. No matter who he encountered along the way, he would only treat the other person as a temporary companion.

The group disguised themselves as rogue cultivators who had wandered into Nanjiang. They hired a horse carriage and continued to the south, going past mountains and ridges.

Cheng Qian and Tang Zhen were both not the talkative type, which made Nian Dada feel suffocated, so he went to bother the easiest target, Liulang.

When Cheng Qian was facing great peril, Liulang had rushed forward without a care for anything, but now that things had settled down, he didn't even dare to speak a word to Cheng Qian. He only trailed after him from a distance, keeping his head down as if in shame, hiding his face in the shadows.

Nian Dada ran over to whisper to Liulang, "Hey, young brother, I want to enter Fuyao — Elder Cheng's sect, are you coming with me?"

Liulang swept his eyes to Cheng Qian's back and immediately withdrew his gaze, silently shaking his head.

Nian Dada thought that he was blind to the greatness right in front of his eyes and immediately chattered noisily, "Ah, you don't understand this kind of thing, let me tell you — those who can cultivate primordial spirits are powerful people who can ascend to the heavens. Let's not mention the common folk, even cultivators from many smaller sects have never even seen primordial spirit cultivators."

Liulang didn't reply, only listening silently.

Nian Dada quite liked being a senior, so when he saw that Liulang's attention was on himself, he became more spirited as he spoke, "What's more, each primordial spirit cultivator is different. Look at those seniors of the Fuyao Sect, our Elder Cheng... Aiya, no need to explain further. There's also their sect leader, he's a sword cultivator! It's my first time seeing a living sword cultivator... His temper wasn't great, but it's okay. Being able to speak to a sword cultivator above the level of primordial spirit is already enough for me to brag about out there for years."

Liulang shook his head, struggling to speak with his hoarse voice, "Tang Zhenren has saved my life, I must stay to serve him. Moreover, my abilities

are low, I'd only be a hindrance if I followed Cheng Zhenren. I can only keep his grace in my heart for now, and pay it back in the future."

Hearing this, Nian Dada was stunned. He suddenly told Liulang, "You... If it's you, Elder Cheng might actually be willing to take you as a disciple."

Liulang lowered his head and said no more.

They were only traveling for a hundred *li* or so, but their group had been robbed by all sorts of demons at least ten times.

With one strike, Cheng Qian cut down two demonic cultivators trying to kill them and seize their things in the middle of the night. It felt like he had been killing people like flies these past few days. A thin sheet of bloody frost had formed on Shuangren, reflecting a faint murderous intent on Cheng Qian's face, adding more to his aura that repelled people.

After the demonic dragon appeared in Nanjiang, the demonic cultivators also seemed like they were preparing to revolt, amassing support everywhere. Their methods were quite simple and violent — they completely slaughtered all the people in a town and occupied it without further ado. The entire town was shrouded in a bloody aura, human heads displayed everywhere. Then they reversed the flow of Qi in that place, forming quite a few demonic towns.

Unfortunately, the Icy Fire was located within the territory of the demonic town.

What they referred to as 'Icy Fire' wasn't actually real fire, it was a special stone. It was said that the layer of ice on its outside was like cold ice that had been accumulated for thousands of years, but its inside was a warm jade full of spiritual energy. It could preserve corpses for thousands of years without freezing the entire corpse through. When removed, it would seem

as if the person had just passed. It was a holy stone that was the foundation of Zhaoyang, a large town in Nanjiang.

Nanjiang was painfully hot, miasma covering the entire place. One could say that the weather was foul. Only Zhaoyang could maintain spring-like weather all year round thanks to the Icy Fire. Travelers and merchants would gather in this place, gradually turning it into the number one town in Nanjiang... Now, the demonic cultivators had taken full advantage of it.

Nian Dada heartlessly sighed, “I was originally thinking, this ‘Icy Fire’ is the foundation of these people’s town, how could they be willing to hand it over? We also can’t snatch it by force — now great, Zhaoyang has been taken over by the demons. It wouldn’t go against our morals, whether we tried to take it by force or tricked them out of it. Really, having the right timing is better than being early.”

Cheng Qian definitely didn’t believe this was just a case of having the right timing, and gave Tang Zhen a meaningful glance.

Tang Zhen was quite forthcoming, straight up saying, “Right timing? I had predicted long ago that the south is going to fall into unrest, I’ve purposefully come to take advantage of the situation this time. What we call ‘God’s design’ is simply paying attention to the surroundings and having some prediction skill. Demonic energy has been gathering in Nanjiang recently, the great sects are making their moves, even the Office of Heavenly Affairs has assembled quite a large number of experts. I reckoned it was about time, but I didn’t expect there to be a momentous event like the birth of a demonic dragon.”

Cheng Qian’s heart felt cold. Han Yuan really just had to transform into a dragon — and he had gone to the north, could he be going to the Imperial Capital?

Could it be... he was still bearing a grudge about Zhou Hanzheng's Soul Painting, and wanted to cause an uproar in the Imperial Court?

Cheng Qian had been friends with Tang Zhen for so many years. Even though they weren't very close due to their personalities, maintaining an air of 'The friendship of scholars is as plain as water' [1], they would still have fewer misgivings talking to each other than to outsiders after all. So Cheng Qian asked bluntly, "Tang-xiong, I'd like to consult you on something..."

Tang Zhen understood without being told, "Your Si-shidi?"

"That's right," Cheng Qian asked, "From what you've seen, does my Si-shidi really have two souls in his body?"

At the foot of Fuyao Mountain, before recognizing the grown-up Shuikeng, one Han Yuan was constantly trying to let this foreign maiden escape, while the other one wanted to kill her.

Under the Heavenly Tribulation, one Han Yuan declared that he was going to extract Shuikeng's *yao* bone, but the other one, in trying to save Shuikeng, had pulled back the demonic energy through such pains...

"I don't think you understand what it means to 'enter the Dao through xinmo'," Tang Zhen said, "The other half on his body is none other than the xinmo he had raised. After reaching his cultivation level, the xinmo had long since surpassed its host's control, and could lash back against them, what would you call that? The xinmo is him and isn't him, his deepest hatred will definitely align with that xinmo, but if... your Da-shixiong insisted that he was being possessed by a demonic being, it *can* be accepted, somehow."

Cheng Qian, "How could he get to this point?"

“I have no idea, you can only guess,” Tang Zhen thought for a moment and spoke without any misgivings, “Let’s take me for example. Right now, I’m just a lone spirit, I’ve always dreamed of having a new physical body of my own. Body possession is clearly the best way — not only would I get a physical body that doesn’t rot, I can also take over the other person’s cultivation as my own. Even though the path of body possession is part of the dark arts, it’s not as if I can’t do it, I simply would rather not go down this path. But if I had a stubborn xinmo right now, it would be much more convenient. Whatever it is that I wanted but am not willing to do, it would be able to accomplish. I could get what I wanted and pretend that it wasn’t done out of my own accord, isn’t it a win-win for me?”

Even though Tang Zhen said he ‘had no idea’, his words were so precise. For a moment, Cheng Qian couldn’t find the words to reply.

Tang Zhen continued, “That demon lord Shidi of yours, did he have a good relationship with you back then?”

Cheng Qian’s fingers gripped Shuangren tightly. His voice was low in his throat as he said, “Closer than blood relatives.”

Tang Zhen gave a light smile. “Then doesn’t it make sense? His cultivation was low, and when the sect encountered danger, not only was he unable to ward off the enemies, he was used by the enemy instead and ended up killing you by mistake, how could he face his sect allies after that? How could he face himself? It would be easier to simply make use of the remnants of this Soul Painting’s influence to add fuel to the flames, allowing the xinmo to grow in an unconventional gambit — in the path of xinmo, only someone who is both powerful and weak can achieve success. If you think about it, this Si-shidi of yours is quite a talent, too.”

“Don’t speak anymore.” Cheng Qian abruptly stood, wishing he could immediately go back to Yan Zhengming and the others. He quickly said,

“I’ll help you get the Icy Fire tonight. Tang-xiong, tell me the way.”

Demonic cultivators indulge themselves in their desires, so the demonic city is nightless.

That very night, Cheng Qian snuck into the city on his own.

He withdrew his own living aura, passing through layers upon layers of bloody demonic barriers. He procured the city map that Tang Zhen had given him, examined it, and couldn’t decide his next move for some time. The inner city had three towers — the clock, drum, and gate towers — and the Icy Fire was in the lot right in the center, chilling the streets interconnecting various places. It was the perfect spot to dispel the miasma and humidity in this place. Cheng Qian had originally intended to just dig it up in secret without anyone’s notice and leave, but he never expected that at the moment, the Icy Fire’s location had been taken over by these uneducated demonic cultivators, who had ridiculously built a tower on top of the Icy Fire.

Cheng Qian looked at the small tower in front of him, out of which came decadent music. He felt extremely helpless as he hid at the corner of the street, unable to decide if he should barge in with his sword raised to eliminate the enemies and snatch the stone, or if he should enter more discreetly and act as opportunity arises.

Right then, stumbling footsteps came around the corner.

A demonic cultivator whose body wasn’t covered with much fabric stumbled over, clearly drunk.

Cheng Qian didn’t care at first. After he withdrew his own living aura, the demonic cultivators usually treated him as a human-shaped puppet, nobody would pay him any mind.

But this newcomer was a bit strange. After spotting Cheng Qian from afar, the demonic cultivator came over curiously, circling around Cheng Qian a few times. Seeing his emotionless face and the lack of living aura on him, the demonic cultivator touched Cheng Qian's face with a grin, his nose twitching as he sniffed. "Who left their puppet out here? Such high quality, aren't I lucky..."

As he spoke, the demonic cultivator lecherously attempted to reach into the front of Cheng Qian's robe.

Cheng Qian, "..."

He was immediately creeped out, chills violently crawling up his spine.

The demonic cultivator was considerably drunk, mumbling on by himself unsteadily, "Eh... why'd it seem like it could move on its own? Heheh, your original owner must've had quite some fun..."

Cheng Qian couldn't stand it anymore, sending out a sharp chill. The demonic cultivator abruptly snapped out of it, meeting a pair of murderous eyes head on. The next moment, before he could make a single sound, his throat went cold as it was cut through in one strike.

After this encounter, Cheng Qian immediately discarded his own idea of entering carefully. His figure turned into a shadow as he burst into the tower's courtyard walls.

A row of corpses lay inside the walls. Some of them only died recently, their spiritual energy hadn't dispersed, so one could tell that they had been cultivators. Cheng Qian swept his eyes over the place quickly and realized that not a single corpse was intact. All of them were missing either an arm or a leg, or even only had a head left behind. There was no telling which part belonged to who.

In the corner, there was a female cultivator whose features were slightly similar to Shuikeng. Cheng Qian's heart leapt and he couldn't help looking more closely. Her cheeks were slightly plump, and there was a red beauty mark in between her brows. She was considerably more beautiful than his skinny Shimei who would stick feathers in her hair, but her body was gone from the chest down.

For a beauty to meet this fate, even a steel-hearted person like Cheng Qian couldn't bear to keep looking. He gripped Shuangren and went along the edge of the wall to land on the rooftop lightly.

It was then that Cheng Qian realized, this small tower wasn't simply built on the place, it was actually an artifact — it seemed to be the size of an ordinary restaurant on the outside, but it was shockingly large on the inside. The area was easily at least a half *li*, with quite a few floors.

He looked inside and saw hundreds of demonic cultivators currently seeking pleasure like mad. An unknown scent wafted up to the roof, a cloyingly sweet aroma carrying a hint of fishiness. It was a bit disgusting for Cheng Qian.

In the corner of the bottommost floor, there was a hidden room. A lot of people were locked inside. The distance was too far, so it was hard to tell whether they were cultivators or common people. A few demonic cultivators walked over to open the door. After a moment, they used a chain as thick as an adult's arm to pull a young man out.

The man's clothes were originally white, but its front had been stained with dried, blackened bloodstains. Barely alive, he was dragged out to be thrown on the platform in the middle and tied up.

A short-statured demonic cultivator came up with his upper body bare, a steel whip in his hand. He circled around the place once and started

whipping that person under everyone's eyes, causing blood to fly all over the place. The demonic cultivators around them all cheered in high excitement, as if it was the celebration of the new year.

Cheng Qian couldn't help his curiosity, so he paused to look closer. He felt like the short demonic cultivator wasn't holding back at all, but it didn't seem like he was planning to kill the man. He wondered in his heart, *Is he planning to torment him slowly? Or is the whip-holder being kind and intending to let him live?*

Before he could finish wondering, Cheng Qian saw a few demonic cultivators get onto the stage while posing coquettishly. There were men and women, who, in his Da-shixiong's words, were quite unsightly in form, yet they had no self-awareness at all. These people spent a ridiculous amount of time walking those few steps, bending and twisting every part of their body that could be bent, and came to the center like a bunch of snakes on legs.

Cheng Qian thought in confusion, *Now what are they making such a spectacle for?*

The next moment, he became stupefied as he saw these demonic cultivators chaotically come together to clamber all over the man's body, thoroughly molesting the half-dead man until his clothes were barely hanging on. Then, still surrounding him, they began to engage in intercourse.

Cheng Qian, "..."

What the hell kind of place is this!

[1] '*The friendship of scholars is as plain as water*' The phrase used here is , which is part of an idiom that goes like this:

‘
The friendship of a scholar is as plain as water, while the friendship of a petty man is sweet as rich wine. But the tastelessness leads to affection, while the sweetness leads to revulsion.

It is sometimes said that the friendship of a scholar is true friendship.

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“Demonic cultivators have no morals, they have few misgivings when they act, and Nanjiang is their main base. You definitely are powerful in your own way, but you might not necessarily know of their various methods. Leave immediately after taking the Icy Fire, try not to confront them directly in the town... Even if you must fight, remember to take the fight outside the town.”

This was the advice that Tang Zhen had given Cheng Qian right before his departure — he hadn’t been so careless that he’d completely pushed it to the back of his mind.

But after Cheng Qian saw this scene and recalled the bare-chested demonic cultivator he had encountered at the entrance, he immediately became a bit flustered, and wished he could cleave this demon lair into two.

He repeatedly suppressed the goosebumps crawling on his skin. At last, he started reciting the Scriptures on Clarity and Stillness, and finally calmed his own agitation as well as the hand pressing on the hilt of his sword.

Then Cheng Qian made a seal with his hand. Making use of the many shadows and shaded areas in the small tower, he descended along the wall.

Fortunately, despite their numbers, the people in this place were all the same. Everyone was occupied with their lust, so nobody noticed the smoke-like Cheng Qian.

Cheng Qian ducked behind a curtain, fully focused on blocking out the surrounding unsightly actions and objects, and started looking for the Icy Fire — he produced a small jade turtle that Tang Zhen had given him. The small turtle's body was entirely jade green, glittering and translucent, only the size of an adult's thumb. The turtle circled around on his fingertip with its tail raised, its round head bobbing around in the air. At last, it came to a stop facing one direction, opened its mouth, and put on a yearning look.

Cheng Qian raised his head to follow its gaze, and immediately felt like he had been struck by lightning — this little beast was facing that platform!

He had suspicions that this thing's brain had been muddled by the fumes, so he pinched the turtle's neck and turned it over. With its shell facing down, the small turtle's short legs kicked around in the air, and it still turned around to face the platform.

This was proof that either the little turtle was a pervert among turtles, or the Icy Fire was located under the platform.

Cheng Qian sighed internally. It seemed he had been agitated by the matter with Han Yuan and had become too hasty. Tonight must be a night unsuitable for him to go out.

But things had reached this point now. Cheng Qian swept his eyes over the place and went over to where the people were locked up. His figure flickered, a layer of white frost forming around him. The guards at the entrance were frozen in their original position. Cheng Qian quickly went past the prison, at the same time sending out a bolt of energy, accurately breaking the lock on the steel cage.

There wasn't much action here, but it still alerted a few demonic cultivators in close proximity. One of them exclaimed, "Who's sneaking around?"

Cheng Qian's footsteps didn't falter, but he internally wanted to throw up — he truly had no idea how these people could possibly have the face to say other people were being sneaky.

He intended to get things done as quickly as possible. The thin frost and fine mist on his body spread out instantly, turning into a snowstorm in the tower. Afterward, before the people on the spot had any chance to react, he opened up the hidden cage in the corner.

This was quite immoral of him. The demonic cultivators in this place mostly didn't wear much clothes, and had to endure such coldness with their bodies bare. In an instant, chaos erupted, turning the place into a mess of human bodies.

Taking advantage of the confusion, Cheng Qian came close to the platform. Shuangren created a bright cut in the air as he cleaved the platform in two, at the same time cutting down the demonic cultivators who hadn't managed to escape amid the flying rocks. With a wave of his sleeve, he unleashed the little turtle that had been acting dead for a long while.

Upon landing, the thumb-sized turtle grew into the size of a small mountain, standing tall in the center with an awe-inspiring air. The jade turtle opened its mouth, inhaling deeply as if trying to swallow the mountains and the rivers, shaking the entire small tower. A gigantic stone suppressed under the cut platform gradually revealed itself, about to leave the ground.

Right then, a rare properly-dressed person came out amid the chaos. On the railing of the topmost third floor, a man in long robes, who was wrapped up so tightly that even his face couldn't be seen, burst out of the crowd, exclaiming, "Which little thief is it, you're asking for death!"

Cheng Qian didn't think he could face the words 'little thief' calmly.

From his height, the long-robed man struck down with his hand, not even caring if he would hit his own comrades.

A black cloud formed from that strike. The illusion-like snowstorm that Cheng Qian had unleashed immediately began to disperse. The lower level demonic cultivators who were too slow to escape were also swallowed by the black mist. In an instant, only their bones were left. It was cleaner than a beggar eating a chicken!

So a place like this also had a guard. Cheng Qian laughed coldly and leapt onto the jade turtle's neck. Shuangren flew out of his hand, the piercingly cold sword aura shooting upward like a whirlwind, hitting back the attack and the roof overhead in one go. The chilling sword aura and Nanjiang's hot humid wind clashed in the small tower. With a sharp sound, tepid water droplets flew all over the place.

The long-robed man on the third floor was swept by the sword aura and hurriedly backed off. In the blink of an eye, the jade turtle had taken the chance to swallow the Icy Fire.

Seeing that he'd obtained his goal, Cheng Qian re-shrunk the jade turtle to the size of a thumb and put it in his sleeve. Causing such a great stir, even he himself felt that he had gone overboard. He immediately decided to retreat on his sword, but right then, someone called out from the prison in the corner, "Senior, help, we're disciples of the White Tiger Mountain Village in Xiliang!"

Cheng Qian had blown up the prison on the way earlier, but his aim wasn't to rescue the people, it was to cause a distraction. Even so, he felt that he was already generous enough, who should these people blame for their own lack of skill?

Of course, he didn't think that the disciples of the White Tiger Mountain Village were more important than other people, but after hearing the name of this sect, Cheng Qian couldn't help hesitating — the reason was simple, the Lord of the White Tiger Mountain Village was still holding one of the keys to the Earth Lock of Fuyao Mountain.

Cheng Qian had no idea why Shifu had to leave such a lock, but he couldn't not consider Da-shixiong's worries. No matter if it was true or false, after hearing the words 'White Tiger Mountain Village', he couldn't possibly do nothing.

As soon as Cheng Qian came close to the prison, a group of demonic cultivators threw themselves at him. With a strike of his sword, he unleashed the raging tides of the oceans, beating back the buffoons in one go, and came to the person who had cried out to him.

The person who had called out was a young man, his features seemingly quite quick-witted. His eyes were bright and piercing, a brilliant light glowing within. Cheng Qian originally found him troublesome, but after seeing those eyes, he couldn't help having a better opinion of him. The young man was originally only holding onto a thin shred of hope, and didn't think that Cheng Qian would actually turn back to extend his help. For a moment, he was overwhelmed with joy.

But even if he was overjoyed, he hadn't turned ignorant. As soon as he saw Cheng Qian, he immediately exclaimed the most important thing, "Senior, there's a restricting charm on our chains!"

Hearing this, Cheng Qian raised his sword without another word. A loud clang was heard as Shuangren clashed with the chains, but they didn't budge in the slightest.

“No, you can’t use force.” The young man immediately said, “I’ll think of another way, Senior... Look out!”

A few demonic cultivators had approached, jumping out from behind Cheng Qian.

Cheng Qian didn’t even turn to look, swinging Shuangren around in his hand. It was rare for this lethal sword to go on a murderous spree. Shuangren’s bright blade was painted blood red, the sword quivering as if it had come alive. Wherever it reached, a murderous intent came with it. It took one head after another, and finally turned back around with flying droplets of blood. Before the young man could speak up, it had struck a second time in the same spot as before.

The young man’s breath was stuck in his throat. In an instant, the lethal sword and the demonic restricting charm had collided three times, each time more vicious than the last. The dark aura and the cold frost tangled together, clashing until it was difficult to tell them apart.

The chained young man couldn’t even open his eyes in the face of this clash. He couldn’t fathom how this person could look so gentle and scholarly, and have such a simple and barbaric way of solving problems.

At last, the fiercer side won.

Under the young man’s stunned eyes, the chain cracked with a sharp sound. The demonic energy leaking out dispersed like dying smoke. What was left was only ordinary steel, which broke with a slight struggle.

Cheng Qian snapped his fingers. A burst of white light took on the form of a flying horse, going straight toward the horizon — this was to inform Tang Zhen that he had obtained their objective and was about to retreat, so they could prepare to come for him.

Demonic energy gathered from all directions, pushing down on Cheng Qian, as if betting everything that they had. He took it all on with Shuangren.

Cheng Qian stood at the heart of the struggle, holding Shuangren like an ant shaking a tree. He told the young man without turning around, “Stand farther away.”

Having seen firsthand how frightening this person was, the young man was quite quick to react. Hearing this, he immediately retreated outside the small tower without looking back.

Cheng Qian abruptly stepped to the side, heavily slashing the sword into the ground with a strike fully charged with demonic energy. A half-*zhang* deep pit was cut open in Zhaoyang with his sword, extending from the east to the west. The dispersed demonic energy fell heavily, and the tower immediately collapsed. Since he had started, he carried through his actions to the end — he released all the unfortunate souls in the prison.

Most of the people locked in there were cultivators who must’ve suffered tremendous torment in this filthy place of evil practices. As soon as they regained their freedom, each of them was quite furious.

Thus ensued a chaotic battle.

Right when Cheng Qian felt that he could retreat successfully in the confusion, the sound of a pipa suddenly came from the distance. The strum of the metal string pierced through the eardrums, straight into the viscera. It felt like the energy around him had been stirred.

And then, just like the songs of Chu resounding from all sides [1], the sound of the pipa resonated throughout the entire town of Zhaoyang. The sickeningly sweet scent that had originally been dispersed by the scent of

blood suddenly rose again from somewhere, bringing with it a strange sensation of numbness. Cheng Qian abruptly felt like he was lying in a pile of cotton, some kind of unspeakable aching and moist feeling rising in his limbs. A faint murmur came from next to his ear as a pair of arms wrapped around his waist with utter gentleness. Fingertips brushed across his body, causing a tingling sensation, as if there were ants crawling on him.

Unfortunately, even though the demonic cultivators had songs of enchantment, they had run into a block of steel this time — Cheng Qian had never been affected much by lust to begin with, and he had just seen various undesirable sights in this place. Goosebumps rose on his body continuously, and he stirred a cyclone with Shuangren in rage, slicing the necks of everyone around him. When Cheng Qian smelled the suffocating fragrance that had rubbed off on his own body, he desperately wished he could jump into a ditch to scrub himself clean.

Seeing his unfeeling heart, someone snorted lightly from not too far away. The pipa song abruptly shifted, the sound of what seemed to be a leaf flute mingling within, sharp and thin, piercing straight into his ears.

Cheng Qian's vision went blurry as the illusion rose again. In an instant, countless people's figures flashed in his mind. The cloyingly sweet scent from earlier instantly vanished without a trace as the familiar scent of orchids wafted faintly near him. Immediately after, the arms clinging to him turned into a puff of azure smoke, falling a moderate distance away, turning into a familiar person's figure.

That person was holding a fan, looking at Cheng Qian with smiling eyes, a copper coin ring on his hand.

Cheng Qian, "..."

He couldn't help being stunned for a moment, slightly stupefied. Fortunately, he wasn't stupefied for long. The next moment, the very same copper coin ring appeared in the palm of his hand — this was the one that he had taken from the original owner with his own hands.

The Imitation Spirit within it appeared like a ghost. With no regard for consequences, it slapped the person before it, flagrantly dispersing the impostor in one strike. Then, carrying a scornful gaze, it returned to the copper coin ring with a stern expression.

This stupid Imitation Spirit surprisingly had some evil-warding properties too.

Cheng Qian came back to himself, his ears slightly hot. It felt like he wouldn't quite be able to look straight into a mirror for some time.

He unleashed Shuangren, the tip of the sword driving out the moisture in the air, forming a gigantic icicle, which collided with the blade. The sound of clashing stone and metal immediately ruined the pipa song, the illusion shattering like waves amid the mist.

Then Cheng Qian realized that there were strings hung on the walls surrounding Zhaoyang. They were swaying and ringing despite the lack of wind, forming an enchanting array in the town. On the town wall, an androgynous-looking demonic cultivator was holding a pipa. When his gloomy eyes met Cheng Qian's, he immediately concealed his own presence.

The young man who had run out earlier landed next to Cheng Qian, trying to catch his breath as he spoke, "This demonic lord is one of the Nightmare Walkers, the leader of a sect called 'Huanxi Sect [2]', an extremely lowly fellow — Oh, this junior is Zhuang Nanxi, a disciple of White Tiger Mountain Village. I've come to this place under the orders of the sect to

investigate the large gathering of demonic cultivators, but I had fallen prey to these people's trickery due to my negligence — how may I address Senior?"

"Fuyao, Cheng Qian." Cheng Qian tossed these simple words and abruptly leapt into the air, striking down a demonic cultivator who was about to sound a signal on the clock tower. He looked down on Zhuang Nanxi from the height and said, "Why aren't you leaving, are you waiting to be ganged up on by the lowly demonic cultivators in the entire town?"

Hearing this, Zhuang Nanxi leapt onto a large tree in the town. Following the rise and fall of his figure, a large bow formed in the air. Zhuang Nanxi threw himself onto the 'bow', at the same time yelling, "Xiao-Qi, lend me a fire —"

A skinny young man popped out of somewhere, quickly making a seal with his hand. He produced a ball of cold fire from his mouth and flew toward Zhuang Nanxi, saying, "Last one."

Zhuang Nanxi produced a long whistling sound. The indigo-blue flame abruptly extended in length, the jumping sparks turning into an arrow. It accurately set itself on the bow, and with a whoosh, flew toward the sky. Then it exploded into thousands of sparks, blooming where it landed, turning the entire Zhaoyang Town into a sea of fire.

Zhuang Nanxi turned to the sky and whistled. From around them, numerous whistles sounded in response. Many figures quickly started leaving the town under his direction; the disciples were well-trained.

Cheng Qian watched calmly from the side, and couldn't help sighing with emotion — compared to the disciples of Azure Dragon Island, who looked like a bunch of people in mourning, and the Scarlet Bird Tower, which had become a haunted house with no disciples, even though the people of White

Tiger Mountain Village were lacking in experience, they were honestly quite promising.

Under Cheng Qian's watching eye, the group broke through the gate of Zhaoyang, escaping to the north with a gang of demonic cultivators at their heels.

Zhuang Nanxi raised his voice to ask Cheng Qian, "Senior, how do we shake them off?"

Cheng Qian, "No need."

He had only just finished his words when a black streamer fell from the sky. It didn't touch Cheng Qian's group while accurately hitting the demonic cultivators.

In the air, Tang Zhen had gotten a flying horse from somewhere, and was waiting for him with Liulang and Nian Dada.

"Take it," Cheng Qian tossed the jade turtle, which had swallowed the Icy Fire, into Tang Zhen's bosom, "This place isn't good to stay in, leave!"

Seeing the overwhelming demonic energy, Nian Dada had long since been frightened out of his mind, and was waiting for these words. He immediately shook the reins, sending the flying horse off quickly.

Nian Dada, "Cheng Shishu, hurry —"

Cheng Qian paid him no mind, leisurely staying where he was.

In the blink of an eye, an opening had been cut on Tang Zhen's black streamer. The Huanxi Sect Leader, who had been standing on the town wall

earlier, had burst out of the crowd himself, but he stopped some distance away from Cheng Qian.

This place was outside the demonic town, there were no demonic artifacts and traps for them to rely on. The Huanxi Sect Leader was suddenly regretting his rash decision to run out here.

Unless they were some truly remarkable genius, if someone who indulged in the demonic path were to really compete with their strength, they would find themselves a bit lacking.

Cheng Qian stood on his sword alone in the air. The sleeves of his slightly worn robes fluttered in the wind, as if he could fly off with the breeze at any moment. But for some reason, nobody dared to come within a three *zhang* radius of him. An odd suffocating silence spread on the sky of the south.

The Huanxi Sect Leader swept his gaze to the direction in which Zhuang Nanxi's group had escaped, and carefully asked, "Might I inquire, what grudge does this honored Sir have toward my sect? Why would you attack my Zhaoyang Town for no reason?"

This demonic lord really was making himself at home. He was actually treating Zhaoyang as their own territory.

"There was none in the beginning, and I'm not some kind of saint who rids the world of evil either, it's just..." Cheng Qian stared at the pipa in the Huanxi Sect Leader's hands. As he spoke, he slowly unsheathed Shuangren. The scrape of cold steel against the scabbard produced a piercing screech. He suddenly gave a cold smile, "How bold of you, using that filthy demonic thing to take on my sect leader's form!"

The next moment, Shuangren burst out explosively. Cheng Qian's power, which had been suppressed while in the demonic town, finally unleashed its fangs without any inhibition —

The Huanxi Sect Leader was shocked. His fingers gripped the pipa strings and they broke at the same time, the sound going right toward Cheng Qian. As soon as he released the attack, the Huanxi Sect Leader turned around to escape, completely disregarding his underlings' lives.

Unfortunately, he couldn't run far.

When his body was pierced through from behind, he could hear the other person's low voice, "You'd better remember this strike and my advice. In your next life, before you touch upon someone's sore spot, weigh yourself and see if you have the capability to live through it!"

[1] '*the songs of Chu resounding from all sides*' The phrase used here is , which is an expression for when one is utterly surrounded by enemies. The phrase originated from the Chu-Han battle, more specifically the battle of Gaixia. Xiang Yu, the ruler of Chu, had been surrounded by the Han soldiers, and his own army's encampment was running low on supplies. The Han soldiers sang the songs of Chu, which led Xiang Yu to believe that Han forces had conquered the land of Chu, and caused the morale of the Chu army to plummet.

[2] '*Huanxi Sect*' The phrase used here is , which basically translates to 'Sect of Delight'.

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Cheng Qian had successfully obliterated that person, but he still felt like there was a fish bone stuck in his throat. His emotions wouldn't settle and it annoyed him, no matter how he thought about it.

To be honest, did he really need to go so far? He himself was always complaining about his Da-shixiong, to whom he rarely ever showed any respect. But he just couldn't accept it, it felt like someone had stepped on his tail or plucked his nilin, for some reason.

Cheng Qian even thought of Han Yuan in his anger — what kind of people had he been hanging around these past years?

The slap he'd given him back then really was much too light.

Cheng Qian knew that Tang Zhen definitely wouldn't wait for him after obtaining the Icy Fire, so he didn't stay around. He shook off the demonic cultivators of Nanjiang with a foul mood, leaving this sketchy area without a clear goal. But even if he was leaving, for a moment, he had no idea where he should go. Logically, since he had finished his business here, he should head north to go after Da-shixiong and the others, but Cheng Qian felt a bit hesitant to face Yan Zhengming for some reason.

Fortunately, it seemed like there was always someone ready to provide for him as soon as he needed something on this day. Cheng Qian had just reached the outskirts of Nanjiang when he encountered Zhuang Nanxi, who had been waiting for a while.

Zhuang Nanxi had sent his sect allies off and stayed waiting here alone for a long time. As soon as he saw Cheng Qian, he immediately came forward, making an obeisance, “Senior Cheng! Many thanks for Senior’s help, otherwise we would’ve all perished here.”

This person was quite quick-witted and skilled, so Cheng Qian had a good impression of him. He waved off his thanks, “No need to be so courteous. I’m also not some kind of formidable senior, I just happened to pass by, it’s no trouble at all.”

Zhuang Nanxi was stunned, “Then, Senior had broken into Zhaoyang only for the Icy Stone in the town?”

Cheng Qian didn’t understand why he would ask that, and didn’t bother to correct his mistake, “That’s right, why?”

Zhuang Nanxi seemed a bit anxious as he said, “When we fell into the demonic cultivators’ trap a few days ago, there was one Shimei who had fortunately gotten away. When I saw Senior, I originally thought that she had asked you for help...”

Cheng Qian said, “Doesn’t your Shimei have any way to contact your sect, would she grab a random stranger on the road to come and save you?”

After being rendered speechless for a moment, Zhuang Nanxi could only smile wryly, “This... Shimei is actually only a way of address, she is originally... a friend of mine that I had met by chance... Nn, I originally thought that Senior might have met her.”

Cheng Qian was only asking on a whim, he wasn’t really that interested. “You waited for me here, all for her sake? What does she look like?”

Zhuang Nanxi immediately gave him a long-winded description, his word choices fully containing expressions of beauty. After being smothered with what could be summarized as ‘outshining the moon and putting flowers to shame, sinking fishes and alighting birds [1]’, he learned nothing useful other than her being a beautiful maiden, so he blurted out, “She’s your lover, right?”

Zhuang Nanxi, “...”

He never thought that anyone could be so straightforward. As he looked at Cheng Qian, stunned, a bright flush started spreading down his ears. Zhuang Nanxi’s gaze was a bit too expressive for a man, it felt as if his eyes could speak. Whenever his gaze turned, all of his emotions would be contained within.

But Cheng Qian frowned internally. He couldn’t help thinking back to the unsightly behavior of the demonic cultivators in Zhaoyang as he thought, *Instead of cultivating properly, he’s been distracted by absurd things. Is he really the successor of a powerful sect? Looks like the mourners of Azure Dragon Island are better, at least they’re focused.*

As he thought this, Cheng Qian immediately became annoyed and didn’t care to entertain Zhuang Nanxi anymore. But when he recalled that this person was still a part of White Tiger Mountain Village and they might still need to interact in the future, he could only suppress his own emotions.

Cultivators were still humans after all, so they couldn’t escape from the shackles of the mortal world. Even if Cheng Qian didn’t care to think about himself, he had to think about his sect. No matter how annoyed he was, he still had to show some courtesy. Thus, he said, “The female cultivators I’ve seen along the way mostly match your description. Only going by that much, I can’t tell.”

“Yes, yes, I was careless.” Zhuang Nanxi wrung his hands in slight embarrassment and continued, “She has an oval face, and there’s a red beauty mark in between her brows. It’s quite distinctive, if Senior has seen it, you should have some recollection of it.”

Cheng Qian, “...”

He was only asking out of courtesy, he never thought he’d actually seen her before — there’s quite a lot of people who would paint a red beauty mark on their face, but it was rare for them to naturally have one. Wasn’t this the female corpse outside the tower?

Escaped in the confusion, he said... In truth, she never even made it.

Cheng Qian opened his mouth, about to ‘offer his condolences’ coldly. But when he met Zhuang Nanxi’s eyes, for some reason, he suddenly couldn’t say it. He rarely ever saw a gaze like that on a cultivator, a look of ardent hope and longing. As if simply describing that person’s appearance to a stranger had filled him with such joy and satisfaction.

His attachment is quite deep, Cheng Qian thought.

But even as he thought that, the feelings of aversion from earlier had dispersed greatly without his notice. If a person could be so faithful, no matter what kind of feelings they were holding, they would be able to move other people.

For a moment, Cheng Qian was at a loss how to tell him.

Seeing his long silence, disappointment passed on Zhuang Nanxi’s face. “Oh, then she must’ve happened to miss Senior. I’ll look around some more.”

Cheng Qian suddenly said, “You’re constantly thinking about an unrelated female cultivator, wouldn’t it hinder your cultivation?”

As far as he was aware, mortals get married only for the sake of convenience. The men would till the farm and the women would tend to the house, and they would produce offspring to carry on their ancestral line. Cultivators didn’t need to care about any of that. Moreover, cultivating in the proper path usually involved communicating with the heavens and the earth, cleansing oneself from worldly desires, so when cultivators become cultivation partners, most of the time, it was to build relationships between sects or to share cultivation methods.

Every day, they had to contend with the heavens and the earth, fight with fellow humans, and battle their own xinmo. Other than people in the demonic path, who followed their desires, what kind of person would hinder themselves with purely illusory feelings of love?

But as soon as he spoke those words, Cheng Qian immediately felt some regret, thinking to himself, *Ridiculous, what does it have to do with you, why are you even asking?*

Fortunately, Zhuang Nanxi didn’t seem to mind much. He answered, unperturbed, “The senior in our White Tiger Mountain Village said that too. What’s more, she’s just a rogue cultivator who has nothing to her name... But that’s fine. Even if she was a common person, I would still love her.”

Cheng Qian said indifferently, “Common people rarely even reach the age of seventy.”

To speak bluntly, the common people to cultivators were no different from cats and dogs to the common people. At most, they could stay by your side for a few decades. Most of the time, as soon as you started feeling attached,

you would have had to send them off for the last time. In any case, you couldn't be together for long, it was just painful.

But Zhuang Nanxi smiled, saying, "That's not really a big deal. I can just ruin my own cultivation, and we can live a short life as an ordinary married couple together. In this world, as long as it doesn't go against the morals, there is nothing that I wouldn't do for her."

Cheng Qian, "..."

On one hand, he had been shocked by Zhuang Nanxi's rebellious attitude toward the norm. On the other hand, he was glad he didn't carelessly tell the truth earlier. Feelings of compassion started to grow in Cheng Qian's heart. If he kept quiet about the female cultivator's death, as time passed, Zhuang Nanxi would give up if he couldn't find her, right?

As if realizing that he had said too much, Zhuang Nanxi said with slight embarrassment, "These trivial matters of mine shouldn't dirty Senior's ears... eh?"

As the two of them spoke, a bright light suddenly cut across the sky, bursting like fireworks. It was quite eye-catching.

"That's the signal that the Black Tortoise Hall uses to summon their people." Zhuang Nanxi wondered aloud, "Strange, Senior Bian has been in seclusion for a long time, why would he suddenly come all the way here to Nanjiang?"

Cheng Qian, "Black Tortoise Hall of the Four Saints? Isn't their base in the far north?"

"That's right..." Zhuang Nanxi said, "Black Tortoise Hall and our White Tiger Mountain Village are separated by a vast field of ice. The relationship

between our sects has spanned generations, now that they've come, it wouldn't do for me to not pay them a visit. Does Senior Cheng have anywhere to go? If not, why don't you come with me?"

It was just what Cheng Qian was hoping for. Even if he had to listen to so much nonsense from this brat on this trip, it wasn't completely for naught after all. So he gladly went with Zhuang Nanxi.

Even from far away, they could see the black banner covering their entire view. Zhuang Nanxi's expression turned more serious as he said, "Looking at this spectacle, it seems like a great elder of Black Tortoise Hall has come in person. Ah, I heard that a flood dragon had turned into a dragon in Nanjiang, and there's disturbance everywhere. I wonder if this is a good or bad thing."

Cheng Qian said nothing. He could already feel the pressuring aura in the air — back when Island Lord Gu passed away, the entire East Sea had stirred. It must've been like this too, back then. After leaving Mingming Valley, this was the first formidable master who had made him feel pressured, which had awakened some of Cheng Qian's memories regarding Azure Dragon Island.

Zhuang Nanxi declared his own identity from quite some distance away, "This disciple is Zhuang Nanxi of White Tiger Mountain Village, here under Shifu's orders. Paying my respects to the Senior of Black Tortoise Hall."

The moment he finished his words, the pressure around them noticeably lessened, as if clearing a way for him.

As Cheng Qian walked under the black banners following Zhuang Nanxi, he saw that all the cultivators here were wearing black robes. It seemed as if they still carried the aura of the ice field, creating a cold space in the south.

Some of these cultivators must know Zhuang Nanxi, because they cleared the way for him. A few of them nodded at him.

Cheng Qian looked up and saw a flying horse carriage under the sea of banners. The horse was wearing cold, steel armor, the atmosphere around it quite imposing. A middle-aged man stood in front of the carriage, his eyes sweeping toward them like lightning. Zhuang Nanxi stepped forward with a greeting of ‘Great Elder’. The great elder exchanged some pleasantries with him, gaze involuntarily turning to Cheng Qian. “This is...”

Two powerful forces met head on, the thousand-year-old icy lake meeting the boundless snow field. Cheng Qian could almost feel his fighting instincts being stirred. He stilled himself, reaching out to calm the restless Shuangren, and was about to answer.

Right then, someone exclaimed loudly from the side, “Great Elder! I recognize him, it’s him!”

“I’m what?” Cheng Qian was stunned. Before he could even think, the person who had exclaimed was already in front of him — his strike was bearing down on Cheng Qian.

At that moment, thousands of *li* away, Yan Zhengming, who had come to the Central Plains following rumors of the demonic dragon, was fiddling with three copper coins in his hand. But he couldn’t figure anything out.

Back when they were still training on Fuyao Mountain, Shifu would occasionally fiddle around with copper coins too, but he had always been extremely secretive about divination. Not only did he never teach them about it, he would occasionally show some appropriately-measured ridicule toward it.

To be honest, a lot of annoying children were like this: if the seniors were to say ‘this thing is bad, it must not be done’, they would most likely want to try it. But if the seniors were to say ‘this thing is so stupid it’s ridiculous, only a monkey who jumps all over the place would do it’, then they wouldn’t think about doing it even after they’ve grown up.

Though a hundred years had passed, Yan Zhengming still knew nothing about divination. In this time of unrest, he couldn’t help wanting to steal a peek into the future, but he still felt that his desire to predict the unknown was extremely foolish.

Yan Zhengming let out a deep sigh.

He didn’t know if Han Yuan, who had transformed into a demonic dragon, could still turn back. Neither did he know if he could still see the gates of Fuyao Mountain opening in his lifetime.

More than anything, he didn’t know how to face Cheng Qian.

Yan Zhengming flicked his finger. The copper coin produced a sharp sound as it flew into the air, rising and falling in an arch.

The current leader of the Fuyao Sect thought, at a loss, *Shifu, what should I do?*

Unfortunately, asking was pointless. When Shifu was alive, he only ever said ‘Aiya, just go with the flow’. The old man had always faced change by remaining unchanged, his life was extremely simple. Now, his body was dead and his soul was gone, he must be even more peaceful and free.

Cheng Qian... What was so good about Cheng Qian?

Sect Leader Yan questioned himself internally — that bastard had a foul mouth and an unkind heart. According to Yan Zhengming's understanding of him, with his reserved personality and pretentious act, the words that he spoke were only a tenth of what he had carefully arranged in his heart. The common person probably wouldn't be able to imagine what an unsightly person he was under that dignified facade.

He was extremely stubborn too, and couldn't be reasoned with. He wouldn't relent whether you tried to use force or persuasion, his heart solid like a rock.

He spent fifty years in seclusion in a place of extreme cold, never taking in anything other than cold water. Was there still anything under the heavens that he couldn't do? In any case, Yan Zhengming admitted that he, as the sect leader, couldn't control that bastard Shidi of his.

And all those messy, unbearable bad habits he had, like his slovenly behavior unknown to outsiders. He'd go to sleep without taking a bath, he could touch anything no matter how disgusting, and never remembered to wash his hands afterward... And his complete lack of tact, he would always be extremely perceptive of the things that he shouldn't know, but would only ever have half-baked knowledge about the things that he should know, and often brought up the things that shouldn't be mentioned to people.

Yan Zhengming was only trying to find an excuse for himself at first, but halfway through mulling things over, he had gotten himself mad.

All this time, he had always loved beauty and detested ugliness. He had internally ridiculed people with the word 'blind' countless times, and finally got his karma right then and there. Yan Zhengming realized furiously that he really must be blind.

A voice suddenly came from behind him, “Da-shixiong, the copper coin’s fallen.”

As soon as the words ‘copper coin’ were spoken, Yan Zhengming instantly felt his heart shiver in guilt.

Li Yun silently appeared from behind him like a ghost, giving him a ghastly look without a word.

Yan Zhengming glared at him, dispirited, “What are you doing?”

Li Yun looked around, as if he was stealing, “Where did Shuikeng go?”

“Playing with fire at the back of the mountain,” Yan Zhengming said, “Why are you acting so sneaky?”

After that thunderous day, Shuikeng realized joyfully that not only had her appearance become more like a mature woman, she also had the ability to control the flames of Samadhi as she pleased. These past days, the novelty hasn’t worn off, so she was diligently striking while the iron was hot to cultivate as much as possible.

Hearing that she was absent, Li Yun plopped down next to Yan Zhengming.

He first took an indirect approach, as if not knowing where to begin, “Why are you suddenly willing to send off that darling of yours?”

Someone with a guilty conscience was different from an innocent person, after all. This normal question successfully made Sect Leader Yan pause involuntarily. His first instinct was to refute with ‘Darling, my ass’, but before he said anything, he couldn’t help feeling that those words were too deliberate. After pondering over it for a moment, he realized that Li Yun

coming to ask that question in itself was already very deliberate. So he pinched the space in between his brows in irritation, getting straight to the point, “What are you trying to say?”

Li Yun sighed, “Shixiong...”

“No, no need to say it, after all.” Yan Zhengming abruptly cut him off again. After a pause, he said, “No need to say it, I’m well aware, I know what to do... I’ve been living for more than a hundred years, I’m aware of my boundaries.”

Li Yun’s face turned serious, a rare display. “Yes, I know you’re aware of your boundaries, but what about *you*?”

Yan Zhengming was stunned.

Li Yun looked at him and shook his head, speaking softly, “The path of sword cultivators was difficult to begin with. Those who could go beyond Point-break are especially rare, each of your steps are placed on the tip of your sword. Your xinmo has manifested, what are you going to do from now on?”

Yan Zhengming was a bit saddened by those words, but he didn’t show it. He put on an uncaring face as he said, “What’s the big deal? The common people’s lives are like ants, their lifetimes pass in a few decades, and they’re always indecisive and changing their minds about everything. Being fickle is evidently an inherent quality of people. I’m no different from everyone else, this will die down in a few years.”

Li Yun sighed, “Shixiong, if it were something that could be pushed to the back of the mind in a few years, how could it turn into a xinmo? Do you think I’m a clueless idiot like Shuikeng, who is oblivious and knows nothing?”

Yan Zhengming, "..."

The two of them stared at each other in silence. After a while, Li Yun asked experimentally, "You're... sure you won't tell Xiao-Qian? In my opinion, you'd be better off..."

With a crack, the copper coin in Yan Zhengming's hand snapped in half. His expression turned cold abruptly as he cut Li Yun off, "Don't mention this subject again."

Li Yun, "But..."

"No buts," Yan Zhengming's gaze was so cold it was frightening, that even Li Yun trembled with fear, "Don't ever mention this matter to a third person, especially Cheng Qian."

Li Yun opened his mouth, about to say something. At last, he swallowed his words back down and helplessly nodded.

Yan Zhengming, "Don't just try to appease me, swear on it!"

Li Yun, "Ah, Da-shixiong..."

"Stop spouting nonsense!"

Li Yun saw that he couldn't defy Yan Zhengming, so he had no choice but to speak up with one hand raised, "I swear to keep this matter a secret, never telling a third person, or..."

Yan Zhengming continued, "Or I'll be struck by lightning and die a miserable death."

Li Yun violently straightened up. “Have you gone mad!”

Yan Zhengming swept his gaze over him and said calmly, “Li Yun, I’ve found a bad habit of yours. You seem to believe that everyone under the heavens who has more guts than you has gone mad.”

Li Yun glared at him and said powerlessly, “If the xinmo is left for too long, it will damage your Dao and heart, then we’ll see what you can do.”

“If I die, it would be just about time for you all to have a new sect leader,” Yan Zhengming stretched his back, “As it happens, I have long since wanted to stop doing this. I heard the primordial spirit can be reincarnated... What if I became a fox spirit? What do you think? When the time comes, you all must urge Shuikeng to cultivate properly and become a great *yao* soon. It would be best if she could seize the throne and become the *Yao* King, so she can cover for me.”

This aspiration of the sect leader had entirely stunned Li Yun. For a long while, he couldn’t say a word.

So Yan Zhengming paid him no further heed. With a light snap of his fingers, he started humming a coarse and toneless tune, “Being born and dying, coming is a pain, leaving is also a pain; Breaking the cauldrons and gold bells, poverty is fleeting, wealth is also fleeting; Fierce winds blow in the east, rain falls in the west, the heavens and the earth are transformed, flaunting the air of a hero, but it’s also just a facade played out daily; Might as well live as a turtle, swallowing the rivers and lakes, spitting out the hundreds of generations passed...”

This was the tune sung by the hoodlums near Fuyao Mountain Village to beg for alms, which made Li Yun feel extremely vexed.

Sometimes, Yan Zhengming envied those vagrants who roamed all over the lands, because they had nothing to tie them down, or anything to worry them. But when he recalled their marvelous forms picking lice under the sun, he no longer envied them. It seemed like he lacked the capacity to make his home wherever he is, and only remembered those little tunes of theirs.

He was trying to cheer himself up, but his heart suddenly seized, as if someone had struck his chest with a hammer. The tune he was humming came to a halt as he sprung to his feet.

“What now?” Li Yun rolled his eyes.

Yan Zhengming’s face looked deadly, “The Puppet Charm I’d tied on Xiao-Qian’s hair...”

[1] *‘outshining the moon and putting flowers to shame, sinking fishes and alighting birds’* The phrase used here is , which is an expression used to describe the four legendary beauties of ancient China: Xishi, Wang Zhaojun, Diaochan, and Yang Yuhuan. The story goes like this for each of them:

– It is said that while Diaochan was praying to the moon, the moon happened to be obscured by some clouds. The person who had seen this scene said that Diaochan was more beautiful than the moon, hence the expression ‘outshining the moon’.

– It is said that while Yang Yuhuan, who is known as Lady Yang, was admiring flowers in the garden, she had touched some flowers with her fingers. Maybe they were shameplants, or maybe there was some other reason, but the petals shrunk at her touch. The maidservants, upon seeing this, said that Lady Yang was so much more beautiful than the flowers that

the flowers lowered themselves in shame, hence the expression ‘putting flowers to shame’.

– It is said that while Xishi was washing silk by the river, the fish in the water saw her face and were so awed that they sank to the bottom of the river, hence the expression ‘sinking fishes’.

– It is said that while Wang Zhaojun was traveling in a desert, she was extremely grieved by her fate and how far away she was from her home, so she started performing a song on horseback. Some wild geese which happened to be flying by heard her song and were so overwhelmed with grief that they fell from the sky, hence the expression ‘alighting birds’.

Of course Cheng Qian wouldn't stand around waiting for other people to attack. Without unsheathing Shuangren, the chilly sword aura had burst forth, carrying some ice fragments within. It forcefully deflected the other person's sword.

He turned around, both baffled and irritated, about to see the identity of this person who had such a large pit in his brain.

But when Cheng Qian saw who that person was, his anger abruptly died down — the newcomer was one of the two primordial spirit cultivators who had been by that fop's side back then.

So... what kind of background did that worthless person in the horse carriage have?

Zhuang Nanxi was still cupping his fist in front of his chest, he hadn't even managed to lower it before this kind of development occurred. He was stunned for a moment and asked, "Great... Great Elder, what is the meaning of this?"

The short cultivator was forced back more than ten steps by Cheng Qian's strike and fell on his bottom. He ended up with dust all over his body, but before he even tried to stand, he barked out first, "Great Elder, this is the person who had brought harm to Young Master!"

Hearing this, the Great Elder's eyes narrowed slightly. He studied Cheng Qian for a moment, as if he was judging the worth of a horse, and spoke up,

“About a month ago, right when the Hall Master was in seclusion, our Young Master ran away from home and did not return for a long time. We searched far and wide, and finally heard news of the Young Master appearing in Nanjiang. But when this old one hurried there to investigate, I found that this useless thing was the only one left from the Young Master’s group of attendants...”

The short cultivator had quite a few years on him, so being called useless right to his face made him turn blue. But he still didn’t dare to make a sound. He was a proud primordial spirit cultivator, but in front of this Great Elder, he was just like a frightened little chick.

Without sparing a glance to the short cultivator, the Great Elder asked Zhuang Nanxi coldly, “On the contrary, Nephew, I haven’t asked you who this person you’ve brought is.”

“Young Master? Could it be... Young Master Bian?” Zhuang Nanxi frowned upon hearing this and gave Cheng Qian a glance. Even though he didn’t seem guilty or scared, he couldn’t help being worried in secret.

The Master of Black Tortoise Hall, one of the Four Saints, Bian Xu, resided in the far north and had been secluding himself from the world for years. Among the Four Saints, other than the eccentric Xu Yingzhi from back then, he was the one who least liked causing disturbances. He had always been respectful and modest all his life, there was never any rumors of him touching upon anything immoral, and he didn’t stand out like the Lord of Azure Dragon Island, the Greatest Master Under the Heavens — unfortunately, his integrity was ruined in his later years. Everything was destroyed at the hands of his only son, Bian Xiaohui.

If children were said to be debts, then the Young Master of Black Tortoise Hall, Bian Xiaohui, must be a high-interest loan.

While Bian Xiaohui's mother was pregnant, she fell prey to an enemy's schemes, and they almost lost two lives in one body. He was the coffin baby that was dug out after his mother's death, and almost couldn't survive. Only after ten years of incubation using all sorts of artifacts in the Black Tortoise Hall did he finally stumble into this world. The Hall Master had exhausted himself mentally and physically for this son, and went even further beyond after his birth. So from when he was young, anything that Bian Xiaohui asked for, he would definitely get.

Unfortunately, he couldn't ask for cultivation.

His natural aptitude was lacking, his body was weak, he couldn't digest most pills, and he'd be crying for his parents whenever cultivation became slightly difficult. After a hundred years, the disciples from his generation had reached Concretion and were flying on their swords, each of them having made their own achievements. He was the only one who, despite the higher amount of efforts exerted, still made very little progress. With other people showing respect in front of him while mocking him behind his back, as time passed, his personality became more and more disagreeable.

This time, it seemed that someone had egged him on, so Bian Xiaohui decided that his cultivation making no progress was because his inborn qualities were unsuited for the cultivation methods of Black Tortoise Hall. Harboring this resentment of blaming the latrine for his inability to take a dump properly, he then brought a group of barely reliable underlings and ran away from home by himself. He went all the way to Nanjiang, planning to try his luck at the Scarlet Bird Tower.

Bian Xiaohui had planned it all perfectly. What they said about Scarlet Bird Tower only opening for 'fated people' was probably just a lie. In this kind of time, to decide who had the right to enter the tower, wouldn't they have to see who had the most power anyway?

At worst, he'd beat the people who dared to be more fated than him to death, and he would then be next in line.

Bian Xiaohui had so many cultivators who could fly on their swords and two primordial spirit cultivators. Logically speaking, intimidating a bunch of rogue cultivators with no background should be no problem at all. Nobody ever expected that the heavens would go against his wishes — he was like an unlucky person who would have something stuck between their teeth even when they were just drinking plain water. He didn't get to enter the tower, and ended up dying in a foreign place instead.

Zhuang Nanxi had heard a great deal about Bian Xiaohui's nastiness. When he thought back to the three brutal strikes Cheng Qian had used to break the demonic restrictive charms in the prison, he worriedly felt that this accusation might be true.

Considering Bian Xiaohui's lack of tact, he really could have angered this senior whose temper is visibly not very good. If he were to be cut down... it really wasn't such a strange thing.

On one side, he had a senior whose relationship with the sect had spanned generations, whom he couldn't afford to offend. On the other side, he had the savior to whom he owed his life. Zhuang Nanxi was extremely torn and could only say weakly with a polite smile, "There must be a misunderstanding here? This Senior Cheng had single-handedly taken on the demonic town, cutting down the Leader of the Huanxi Sect, and saved our lives. Why would he indiscriminately kill an innocent person?"

The Great Elder didn't pay him any mind. Sleeves fluttering, he moved to just beyond five steps from Cheng Qian, staring straight at him as he said, "Do you admit to it?"

From that tone, it was clear that he was ready to send his forces after Cheng Qian. Zhuang Nanxi was worried that Cheng Qian would blow up on the spot and hurriedly lowered his voice, “Let us not resort to violence.”

Cheng Qian was silent for a moment — that useless thing named Bian was cut down by his Da-shixiong’s hands. Of course, the moment he was possessed by the xinmo, he was already dead, so Da-shixiong wasn’t the murderer... but the culprit behind the xinmo issue was his Si-shidi who seemed to be out to ruin their name. No matter what, the Fuyao Sect couldn’t shirk this responsibility.

Heavens, who would’ve thought that a powerful father such as Bian Xu could produce this kind of useless son?

With the grudge of a son’s murder in front of them, they were still planning to ask the Master of Black Tortoise Hall for the chants of the Earth Lock... When Cheng Qian thought of this, he instantly felt his heart turn heavy.

Shifu’s Mountain-Sealing Decree seemed to contain some kind of curse, making it so that each time they had the slightest hope, they would instantly be pushed back into the abyss.

Even if Cheng Qian had an outstandingly strong will, he couldn’t help feeling a slight shred of hesitation in his heart — had the time of Fuyao Sect really come to an end? Was it... really pointless, no matter how hard they struggled?

The short cultivator exclaimed, “Their group were the only people who had entered the Scarlet Bird Tower, and Young Master had met misfortune in the Scarlet Bird Tower. Who could it be if not them?”

Cheng Qian’s gaze swept past him coldly. They were both primordial spirit cultivators, but the short cultivator felt like a frog who’d been targeted by a

snake, and couldn't help the chills crawling down his spine

Cheng Qian didn't admit or deny it, only speaking up slowly, "This fellow cultivator is a primordial spirit cultivator, but you couldn't force your way into the Scarlet Bird Tower. Might I inquire, someone such as your Young Master..."

Cheng Qian's words paused slightly. Even though his tone was respectful, the corners of his eyes revealed some out of place mockery, "... who isn't so adept in cultivation, how had he managed to enter the Scarlet Bird Tower before it even opened?"

The short cultivator was stunned.

Cheng Qian continued, "Furthermore, there were thirty to forty of you with your sect's young master, how exactly had he managed to escape under all of you people's eyes?"

Hearing this, the Great Elder turned to the short cultivator and asked, dissatisfied, "What is going on here?"

The short cultivator was speechless for a moment. He really couldn't escape the blame regarding this matter. Sweat was starting to form on his palm.

Seeing that he had successfully checked the other person, Cheng Qian then said calmly, "While it's true that we'd had some disagreements over trivial matters with your young master in Nanjiang, we're aware that causing harm to others was not a good thing, and both our parties hadn't persisted in the conflict. Back then, after a short exchange, we had gone our separate ways — Fellow cultivator, with the heavens and the earth as witness, is that not the case?"

The short cultivator, "This..."

Cultivators cultivate to the path of the heavens and the earth, yin and yang, and cause and effect. Oaths had always been viewed with considerable weight. Even if they really were completely fearless, before saying anything ‘with the heavens and the earth as witness’, they would always falter involuntarily.

Zhuang Nanxi watched from the side calmly, and couldn’t help studying Cheng Qian in detail. He was a bit surprised. He had originally been thinking that, in addition to how he seemed a bit cold, for this person to have such powerful cultivation at such a young age, he was probably not quite familiar with the ways of the world. He didn’t think that when he was questioned like this, Cheng Qian would be able to give his account in public so calmly, and had the ability to remain cool and collected.

After speaking this far, Cheng Qian frowned and put his sleeves together, speaking with an appropriately-measured amount of haughtiness, “Since we have let him off in public, why would I go through so much trouble to kill him in the Scarlet Bird Tower? How would I know what kind of great person’s son or grandson he is, would I need to be so secretive about killing a newbie cultivator like him?”

The Great Elder found these words logical, but his expression still darkened — he couldn’t quite stand other people thinking highly of their own cultivation in front of him.

Cheng Qian said, “It’s true that I had met your sect’s young master in the Scarlet Bird Tower, but at the time, he had already become a puppet of xinmo, there was no way for him to live anymore — Great Elder, why don’t you try asking your own sect’s people, how did they completely fail to notice their own young master being possessed by xinmo?”

The moment these words were spoken, the short cultivator suddenly realized that his charge had become heavier. His mind quickly turned and

he spoke incoherently to push off the responsibility, “The... The Scarlet Bird Tower had been standing for hundreds of years, why would it so happen that as soon as you people entered, the Scarlet Bird Tower collapsed and a flood dragon turned into a dragon? How do we know that you don’t have anything to do with that demonic cultivator?”

This was practically an unreasonable argument.

Even Zhuang Nanxi couldn’t bear to keep watching, so he came forward to speak, “Great Elder, I vouch for this Senior Cheng. According to his character, there is absolutely no way he would ever be connected to those demonic cultivators. At the moment, Nanjiang is in turmoil, and all sorts of demonic lords are coming out of hiding, causing disasters everywhere. Our first priority should be to band together to face this common enemy, how can we cause animosity between each other right now? This junior is also deeply pained by Young Master Bian’s issue, but now that the misunderstanding has been cleared up, why don’t we discuss how to face the demonic dragon?”

This young man from White Tiger Mountain Village must have been quite educated. His words were carefully chosen to incite people’s hearts.

It seemed like this conflict was about to be resolved with those few sentences.

Hearing those words, the Great Elder’s expression softened slightly. He swept his eyes to Cheng Qian and snorted coldly, “If that’s the case, the people of my sect have neglected their duties, indeed.”

The Great Elder was more than a thousand years old, he was a top-level formidable master in the mortal world. Because he couldn’t stand having to deal with everyday matters, he took on the sinecure of being a great elder in Black Tortoise Hall. Even the Four Saints would have to show some respect

for him. This old fart had been so used to being self-centered, and had always felt that ‘if the heavens were number one, he was number two’, how could he ever be willing to acknowledge Cheng Qian, a junior who was only about a hundred years old?

After Cheng Qian had provided an explanation for himself, and with Zhuang Nanxi smoothing things over from the side, the Great Elder had basically believed those arguments, but he still felt unhappy — the reason was simple, it was only because Cheng Qian’s attitude toward him had been constantly neither haughty nor humble. All these years, was there anyone who hadn’t shown him the utmost respect upon seeing him, even fearing that the timing of their breathing might be off? This little primordial spirit cultivator in front of him was only a hundred years old, how powerful could he be? He dared to think nothing of the Black Tortoise Hall with his cultivation?

Of course the Great Elder looked down on Bian Xiaohui, just like one would look down on the mutt raised in one’s home, but even if that bastard was constantly threatening people with the strength of his father’s backing, he still wasn’t someone for outsiders to kick around.

Even though this Cheng Qian wasn’t the murderer, he seemed to have given that Bian Xiaohui a beating too.

The Great Elder then said, “Fine, since your crime doesn’t warrant death, then this old one will only give you a light punishment, so you youngsters are more aware of the powers greater than you!”

Before he even finished those completely magnanimous words, Cheng Qian could feel a forceful energy he had never felt before pressing down on him. The control over its force was extremely delicate — it wasn’t quite enough to kill him, but it was more than enough to make him fall to his knees and cough up some blood.

Cheng Qian thought he had already been absolutely courteous, he never thought that there really was anyone in this world who would flaunt their own seniority and reject other people's courtesy.

He made no attempt to dodge, and took on this blow by force.

Their energies clashed in the air. Even though they hadn't unleashed their full power, the sand and stones around them were still sent flying.

Zhuang Nanxi knew clearly what kind of unreasonable person the Great Elder was. If Cheng Qian had accepted this blow with no resistance, though he would've taken some moderate damage, the matter might've been resolved just like that. But he wasn't acknowledging the Great Elder's seniority.

Internally, Zhuang Nanxi immediately exclaimed how terrible this was.

As expected, after being met with resistance, the Great Elder went mad with rage and laughed in fury, "Well done, brat, we'll see how long you can keep that up!"

He inhaled deeply and stopped holding back, about to unleash his full power to put Cheng Qian in his place.

Zhuang Nanxi exclaimed, "Senior!"

Cheng Qian had always known when to back off, but he had never known what it meant to be 'forced to back off'. Shuangren spiraled forward with a ringing sound as their energies clashed again.

This time, they were serious. The cultivators around them, including Zhuang Nanxi, all suffered because of it.

The ground shook violently, cracking a one *li* square opening. The mud in the opening immediately froze over, the originally flourishing grass and leaves looking like jasper covered in frost.

The heat that had never left Nanjiang even in autumn abruptly ceased. It was as if the field of ice from the far north had been brought to this place.

Fortunately, Zhuang Nanxi was sharp. As soon as he saw that things were going downhill, he started shifting the energy in his body.

But even then, he still felt a tremendous quake in his chest, and couldn't even raise his face in the roaring cold winds, as if he had encountered a calamity.

The Great Elder and Cheng Qian were each forced back three to four *zhang*. Cheng Qian's face seemed paler than the frost on the ground, but the Great Elder was even worse off. He suddenly hunched over, covering his face with his sleeve, and actually coughed up some blood. The hair on his temples seemed to have been covered with frost in that instant — he was considerably injured!

The area was completely silent. Everyone was shocked.

Zhuang Nanxi originally thought that Cheng Qian had just entered the level of primordial spirit. Even after seeing the brute force of his sword skills, he only thought that he must be a sword cultivator... Who would've thought that he was able to match the Great Elder's power, and seemed to be winning slightly!

What kind of cultivation level would this have to be?

But Cheng Qian's cultivation level was far from being as high as his imagination, this round was completely equivalent to cheating.

Cheng Qian had impulsively tried to clash with the other person's energy, but as soon as he came in contact with it, he realized that he had bitten off more than he could chew — a top-level formidable master like the Great Elder facing him could completely be described as bullying the weak. The depth and density of that old fart's core was beyond Cheng Qian's imagination. Right when he thought that he would be gravely injured if not dead this time around, suddenly, an intangible force from behind him had taken on a considerable amount of the force from the Great Elder's energy.

Cheng Qian was surprised at first. Then, it seemed like some kind of pressure was lifted from the back of his head as his long hair came undone. Cheng Qian reached out, as if aware, and caught the broken white hair tie. Sure enough, with a slight examination, he caught the almost fading air of a Puppet Charm within it.

So this thing had taken on part of the force of that energy, saving his life.

Cheng Qian internally thanked this lucky fluke, his fingertips gently brushing the broken hair tie. Even without thinking carefully, he knew who had put this thing on him. Cheng Qian's heart softened abruptly as he thought, *Yan Niangniang is so meddlesome.*

But immediately after, he frowned, *This is bad, as soon as the charm is broken, he would definitely have felt it too, aren't I causing him to worry?*

When he thought this, Cheng Qian suddenly felt restless, and started thinking how to quickly get out of this situation.

“Great Elder!” A few cultivators of the Black Tortoise Hall frantically rushed forward, striving to be the first to offer up their services to support him. They didn't think that their attempts to gain the Great Elder's favor would backfire this time around.

The Great Elder exclaimed furiously, “Scram!”

He violently swung his sleeves, disregarding friend or foe, sending his own henchmen flying.

The Great Elder had not had a match in so many years, he refused to believe that this brat’s cultivation would be above him. Fury struck his heart then, and he almost had a Qi deviation. He had always believed his own natural gift to be outstanding among the people, and had been cultivating tirelessly these past thousand years. He had never slacked off, not even the slightest bit, how could some unknown cultivator injure him in one strike?

Absolutely impossible!

Unless this person was practicing some kind of demonic cultivation!

The Great Elder roared, “You demonic cultivator, which hell hole did you crawl out of? Do you think you can do as you please by hiding the bloody aura on your body?”

Seeing the shift in circumstances, the short cultivator, who was hiding in the distance, immediately fanned the flames, “I’ve said from the beginning that he was suspicious, Great Elder, that demonic dragon from Nanjiang is definitely related to him!”

Cheng Qian finally understood the meaning of ‘if one is out to condemn someone, there is no shortage of reasons that they can use’.

He had never been a nice person to begin with, and had only avoided offending the Black Tortoise Hall for his sect earlier. At this moment, the anger that he had tried to suppress finally got to his head.

Cheng Qian laughed coldly, “What great display of flapping your lips, I wonder if that long-tailed tortoise spirit of your sect can still see whether it’s black or white!”

The Great Elder roared, “Set up the arrays! Seize this person, we’ll see if he can still spout nonsense on the Immortal-Locking Stage!”

The people around them immediately answered with ‘yes’.

At some point, they had been completely surrounded by the black-robed disciples of Black Tortoise Hall. There were forty-nine of them in total, all of them at the level of primordial spirit and above, their energies interweaving to form an inescapable net.

This ‘Array of the Heavens’ was a valuable great array of the Black Tortoise Hall, which seemed like it could cover the entire sky. Other than the Black Tortoise Hall, was there anyone who could get almost fifty cultivators of such a high level to form this array?

The forty-nine black-robed cultivators exclaimed as one, “Form!”

A buzzing sound rang in Cheng Qian’s ears, his chest seemed to have suffered a heavy blow. Even if his physical body was formed from the Spirit-Condensing Jade, the meridians in his entire body still felt as if they were about to explode. Shuangren’s limitless sword aura was forced out by this great array, the two forces clashing. Though this array was less brutal than a Heavenly Tribulation, it left even less leeway.

Braving the risk of damaging his own primordial spirit, Cheng Qian manipulated Shuangren with all of his strength. That object of malice formed an all-conquering cyclone in the air, forcefully making a hole in the Array of the Heavens. At the same time, Cheng Qian struggled to breathe, a mouthful of blood in his mouth from how hard he was clenching his teeth.

But the Array of the Heavens was closely interlocked. In an instant, the flow of energy had covered that hole. Shuangren was caught up in it instead, like a ferocious beast whose limbs had been tied. No matter what, there was no breaking free.

Cheng Qian abruptly caught the sword's hilt, striking left and right, but he couldn't find that one lifeline. Even the raging tides of the ocean was no match for this inescapable net. The Array of the Heavens was closing in on him.

The white hair tie that he had secretly hid in his sleeve earlier seemed to be aware of his predicament. Even though the Puppet Charm had been broken, it still dutifully used up the last of the clear Qi it had left, carefully circling his wrist and seeping into his meridians, just like a certain person's fussy, unrelenting protection.

In that instant, Cheng Qian suddenly recalled one time he was practicing his sword with Da-shixiong in his youth.

Shuangren abruptly left his hands. In the opening before it was tangled up by the Array of the Heavens for the last time, a sword aura burst out, accurately piercing through the large net, hitting a large tree at the side. After quivering slightly, the tree rapidly grew, sprouting glittering and translucent ice flowers of various sizes.

Spring Upon a Withered Tree.

A branch full of flowers swept forth. Two black-robed cultivators setting the array were caught off guard and were thrown into the air. A large hole was opened from the outside to the inside of the Array of the Heavens. This time, they really couldn't cover it up.

Spring Upon a Withered Tree, from Return to Trueness, the last form of Fuyao Wooden Swordplay, actually corresponded to a lifeline.

In this moment, it had aided him in breaking through.

But right in that instant, Cheng Qian suddenly felt a cold sensation on his waist. He looked down in slight disbelief. Where his skin was exposed from the Array of the Heavens cutting his clothes earlier, there was a small bug the size of a fingernail.

The Great Elder was making a strange seal with his hand from a short distance away, looking at him with a malicious smile.

Who would've thought that a top-level formidable master, the respectful Great Elder standing next to the Four Saints, would actually use a sneak attack with this kind of underhanded trick, without a care for his pride or face?

Where the bug had bitten him, a strange numbness rose, quickly spreading through his entire body. Cheng Qian seemed to have been entirely frozen, stiffly falling along with Shuangren. A bolt of energy from the Array of the Heavens struck his back mercilessly. His vision went black —

There was a celestial mountain in the Central Plains, so tall that it reached the clouds. The peak was blanketed by snow, while the foot of it was covered with all sorts of plantlife. Starting from halfway up the mountain, rain came and went as it pleased, starting abruptly and stopping just as abruptly. Walking there, one could feel all four seasons within a few steps.

This mountain was called ‘Shizhou [1] Mountain’ — that is to say, one division more than Jiuzhou [2]. Even though it was located in the human realm, it didn’t quite feel that way.

There was a saying among the people, ‘Out of ten grand views under the heavens, eight of them are in Shizhou’.

Shizhou Mountain was the tallest peak under the heavens, an extraordinarily beautiful location. Unfortunately, it just had to be a gigantic spiritual energy drain. The clear Qi from the surrounding mountains and rivers were continuously drained into this mountain, without any of it ever leaking out. If cultivators were to stand there, not only would they be unable to cultivate, the mountain would also continuously rob them of their Qi. Because of this, Shizhou Mountain had always remained a place with no master. Then, a few formidable masters worked together to build an ‘Immortal-Locking Stage’ on the ridge of the mountain, adding countless restrictive charms of all sorts. It was specially made to lock up all sorts of terrible people.

On the Immortal-Locking Stage, there were thirty-six Dragon Locks. Even if the person locked within was the Progenitor of Demonic Arts, they still

would be completely immobilized.

From the day this place was built, it had claimed the lives of countless demonic lords. The malicious aura never subsided throughout the years, it felt like there was a bloody air around this place, which could never be cleansed, always circling nearby. It was as if the souls from the ancient times, who either could not have their sins pardoned even in death, or who had died without having a false charge cleared from their name, were lingering in this place, looking upon the mortal world from beyond the boundary between the living and the dead.

Cheng Qian didn't know how much time had passed when he woke up. He could only feel the pricking pain on his back, and almost couldn't get up at first.

After reaching his level of cultivation, he hadn't felt this kind of physical pain in a very long time. Cheng Qian inhaled deeply and struggled slightly, and realized that his limbs weren't chained. He could even walk around within the Dragon Locks. But his energy was completely sealed, so his body felt as heavy as a common person's.

Shuangren had been taken away, of course. At the moment, Cheng Qian was completely unarmed and powerless.

But he wasn't alarmed. After silently calming himself, he looked up and started studying the surroundings. This place was a completely empty hall, where the doors, which faced four different directions, were shut tight. Standing within, the faint light from the thirty-six Dragon Locks allowed him to see the murals depicting the elimination of evil beings. It looked gloomy and awe-inspiring, and was quite reminiscent of the legendary Immortal-Locking Stage.

The numbness at his waist, where the bug had bitten him, had not faded away. Looking down, Cheng Qian could see the bloodstains on the front of his chest, and he smoothed out his clothes slightly. He couldn't remember the last time he'd ended up in such a sorry state.

To be honest, Cheng Qian knew that if it weren't for the Puppet Charm that Da-shixiong had tied to him, he most definitely wouldn't be able to beat that old fart. But the old man was the proud Great Elder of Black Tortoise Hall, to think that when he encountered defeat by coincidence, he would stoop so low as to pull a sneak attack on a junior, not daring to clash head-on again... For Cheng Qian, it felt both sad and laughable.

Some people, after spending too much time looking down on others, would tie their self-worth to their position, and couldn't stand any insult to their power. As time passed, they might frighten themselves into developing all sorts of xinmo.

But Cheng Qian didn't really understand, why would that old fart go through so much trouble to lock him up in the so-called 'Immortal-Locking Stage'? Wouldn't it be easier to just kill him?

After pondering for a moment, he still couldn't find an answer, so he simply tossed the matter aside.

In any case, they had no good intentions.

Cheng Qian wasn't afraid of being locked up here — he didn't care whether they wanted to kill him or cut him up, he was just worried about his Da-shixiong. Cheng Qian had listened to Li Yun's words back then under the Great Dragon's Banner, and had always kept it in his heart. To begin with, it was extremely dangerous for a sword cultivator to develop a xinmo. He didn't dare imagine Da-shixiong's feelings when he felt the Puppet Charm break and couldn't find Cheng Qian afterwards.

So Cheng Qian got rid of all distracting thoughts and sat down, wholeheartedly focusing his inner energy to struggle against the restrictive charms around him.

Right as he was fighting the Dragon Locks, as if betting his own life, he suddenly heard someone speak from behind him, “Ah, young man, don’t waste your energy. If I were you, I’d lie down to have a good sleep now.”

Cheng Qian turned around with some effort, and saw that a person was standing about ten *zhang* from him. He had no idea how this person got in, but he was circling around the Dragon Locks, looking bored out of his mind. That person’s figure looked shriveled, he wasn’t tall, and his back was a bit hunched, which gave off an extremely boorish impression. The beard and the smudges on his face were so dirty that it was hard to tell them apart. The whites of his eyes were the only things so strikingly clean, that they were like a crane standing among chickens.

Even though Cheng Qian didn’t particularly care about hygiene, he was still awed by this person’s sloppiness — he hadn’t seen a cultivator who would get himself so dirty in many, many years.

This person was wearing tatters and continuously scratching himself, that even looking at him would make you feel itchy... if there were lice on a cultivator’s body, they must at least be lice spirits, right?

That person settled next to the Dragon Locks like a big monkey and looked Cheng Qian over, smiling happily. He then spoke up, “Don’t want to sleep? Then let’s chat — kid, how many people are left in your Fuyao Sect now?”

Cheng Qian was stunned. Even though this person looked deranged, he was able to enter and leave a heavily-guarded place like this as he pleased, and actually uncovered Cheng Qian’s background immediately. He most definitely wasn’t someone to underestimate.

Cheng Qian hesitated for a moment and asked cautiously, “Might I inquire, how should I address Senior?”

“Tch, don’t call me Senior, I don’t like hearing it. Aren’t the people at your Fuyao Sect like wild monkeys in the mountains, and have never shown respect?” That person waved his hand, replying, “Don’t act courteous with me, I’m Ji Qianli [3].”

After witnessing his graceful squatting posture, Cheng Qian felt that the label of ‘monkey’ placed on his sect was a great injustice.

Furthermore, a name like ‘Ji Qianli’ really didn’t sound like a real name.

That cultivator who called himself Ji Qianli grinned at him, revealing snow white teeth, “I heard you beat that old fart Yang Decheng so badly he was scrambling to pick up his teeth from the ground, causing him to be shamed into anger? Quite promising, aren’t you, kid!”

Cheng Qian said incredulously, “Who is Yang Decheng?”

Ji Qianli, “He’s the main thug working under Bian Xu. That old fart’s been really cocky these past years, it’s really about time someone dealt with him — ah, he wasn’t like this when he was younger. He got worse with age, it’s all because of ascension.”

From this person’s words, he seemed to be extremely familiar with Black Tortoise Hall. Cheng Qian couldn’t help putting up his defenses, saying apathetically, “If he could turn into a bastard because of ascension, could he possibly have been a saintly scholar before?”

Ji Qianli scratched the back of his neck and said a bit awkwardly while waving his hands, “You’re still young, you wouldn’t understand this kind of thing.”

Cheng Qian sat with his legs crossed [4]. While still trying to struggle against the restrictive charms with his suppressed energy, he spoke unhurriedly, “If the common person could live to my age, they would’ve had five generations living at the same time.”

Ji Qianli smiled, “Your natural aptitude is outstanding, and your cultivation is still improving rapidly. You’ve never taken a wife or a disciple, so even if you continue living this kind of life for thousands of years, you’re still a young man. When you realize one day that everyone under the heavens would refer to you as a senior with utmost respect, and the cultivators who had reached Concretion and could fly on their swords would address you as a forefather, when everyone believes your cultivation is so high it’s unattainable, but you’re well aware that your abilities are falling short of your wishes more and more, and you’re getting farther and farther away from ascension... that’s when you’ve grown old.”

Cheng Qian was stunned. He turned around to meet the old lunatic’s eyes.

Only then did he realize, the old lunatic’s eyes were extremely black, just like the bottomless Abyss behind Fuyao Mountain.

“We’re different from the common people.” Ji Qianli said, “From the moment the common people were born, they knew that they would die. As the years pass, the poor and the wealthy, the good and the bad, all of them would reach the same destination. No matter how far their hearts might fly away, they would always have this place to return to.”

Cheng Qian couldn’t help saying, “Death can be counted as a place to return to?”

Ji Qianli laughed out loud, gesticulating joyfully, “You child... Why don’t you consider, if even death couldn’t be counted as a place to return to, what else could possibly count? But we don’t even have this place to return to,

what is the Great Dao? The Great Dao is just like a radish hung in front of a donkey's face, which we spend every day chasing after. The more powerful you are, the higher your cultivation is, the more you will realize that you are getting farther and farther away from that radish. After commanding the winds and rains all your life, after being called an immortal by the common people all your life, in the end, you will also be reduced to dust like a common person, leaving grass to grow on your grave... Tch, wouldn't the pursuit of a thousand years become a joke?"

When he spoke this far, Ji Qianli's smile suddenly turned a little cold. He sighed, "Be it Yang Decheng, Bai Ji, or Tang Yao... When I still knew these people, they also had such dashing spirits, and were steadfast in their ways. There were things that they would not do, for the sake of greater things, just like the current you."

What kind of rubbish were Bai Ji and Tang Yao?

Hearing this, Cheng Qian's face turned sour and he asked a bit harshly, "Is Senior trying to commend me?"

Ji Qianli shook his head, his voice lowering, "A hundred years ago, Tang Yao and Bai Ji joined forces to kill Gu Yanxue. Less than five years afterward, Bai Ji exhausted his life force and died. The proud Master of Xixing Palace, at the time of his death, his hair was like cold ashes, his figure was withered, with a foul stench on his body, and he couldn't even speak. Most cultivators avoided touching filth, and were used to being clean, so nobody wanted to get close to him. As for Tang Yao..."

"The people of Mulan Mountain had always been cold and detached, and would only be passionate about fighting for power. Thirty years ago, Mulan Mountain underwent great change within one night. Tang Yao was confined at the back of their mountain by his own Shidi, and was claimed to be in

seclusion. These past years, there has been no word of him, he is probably no longer in this world.”

“Only a hundred years have passed...” Ji Qianli stretched his body and sighed, “Once the most powerful people of their times, but what has become of them now? [5]”

Cheng Qian had never had any sympathy to spare, and wasn’t moved after hearing all that. He only said coldly, “The punishment fits the crime, they deserve dying.”

“The punishment fits the crime...” Ji Qianli repeated it once and shook his head, “You youngsters always think highly of yourselves, but for these people to become formidable masters, would any of them not have more resolution than the average person? It’s just... Ah, forget it.”

After the old pauper finished speaking, he abruptly leapt up and told Cheng Qian, “Someone’s coming, I need to go. Don’t worry, since you’ve been brought to the Immortal-Locking Stage, someone will definitely get you out.”

Who?

Cheng Qian’s first thought was Shixiong and the others, or maybe bystanders like Zhuang Nanxi might speak in his favor a bit. Other than them... who else would want to save him?

Before he could ask, Ji Qianli’s expression changed again and he spoke in a solemn voice, “I don’t know if you’re doing it on purpose or if your luck is bad, but you’ve gone overboard. Even if ‘they’ save you, they might not have good intentions... Kid, remember, if you want to live a long life, you need to have some tricks up your sleeves, but you can’t have too many. The world has no place for those who have too many tricks up their sleeves —

you have lessons from the mistakes of your predecessors like Tong Ru and Gu Yanxue, if you don't want to follow their footsteps, you'd better smarten up."

Cheng Qian hurriedly called out, "Wait... Senior!"

Ji Qianli pretended not to hear him, and disappeared quickly.

This person's order of doing things was backwards, but his words seemed to have hidden implications. Cheng Qian's brows knitted — what did he mean, 'lessons from the mistakes of predecessors like Tong Ru and Gu Yanxue'?

Could it be, Shizu falling into the demonic path and Island Lord Gu's death were related somehow?

Before he could figure it out, the four doors of the hall suddenly slammed open at the same time with a bang. The light suddenly flooding in blinded Cheng Qian, so he couldn't open his eyes for a moment. A group of people consisting of strangers and familiar faces walked in with vigorous strides. The spectacle was so large that it seemed like they were unleashing their entire forces to question him.

But the one in the lead on the Black Tortoise Hall's side wasn't the Great Elder Yang Decheng, it was a middle-aged cultivator with a square face, as well as thick eyebrows and large eyes. With one look, Cheng Qian could vaguely guess that this person was the Master of Black Tortoise Hall, Bian Xu.

On the other side, Zhuang Nanxi hurriedly walked in after a middle-aged man with an imposing face. They were the complete opposite of the people of Black Tortoise Hall, and there was a faint feeling of two parties facing off against each other. Among this group, Cheng Qian could spot a few

familiar faces with one sweep of his eyes — all of them were the disciples of White Tiger Mountain Village that he had rescued from Zhaoyang Town.

Zhuang Nanxi signaled at Cheng Qian with his eyes from a distance, as if telling him to rest assured.

Other than these two sects, there were quite a few cultivators who had come to get in on the action. Unexpectedly, even Tang Zhen, who should've gone far away, had also found his way in.

Under everyone's eyes, Cheng Qian sat atop the Immortal Locking Stage. Out of nowhere, he felt a strange feeling of honor in his heart. Back then on Azure Dragon Island, he was just a small rogue cultivator who hadn't even reached Concretion. He was only able to brawl with others using brute force, and could only watch the battle between the formidable masters on the island, without even the right to speak. He was like a fragile egg hidden under the nest, anxiously staying hidden.

A mere hundred years had passed, but he was now being served the same treatment as Island Lord Gu.

Yang Decheng was about to say something, but the square-faced cultivator next to him raised his hand to cut him off.

That person stepped forward to speak, "I'm the Master of Black Tortoise Hall, Bian Xu. Fellow cultivator, Elder Yang of my sect claims that you're using a unique method to hide your cultivation, that you are a demonic cultivator in truth, and that you have claimed my son's life. The grudge of a son's murder should've been absolutely irredeemable, but Nephew Zhuang of White Tiger Mountain Village did everything he could to act as your guarantor and defend you. Though this old one cannot stand the pain of losing my son, I do not wish to harm the innocent for this reason, so we've brought you to the Immortal Locking Stage. With these reputable people

under the heavens as witness, I hereby ask you: what kind of connection does the demonic dragon of Nanjiang have with you, and did my son Bian Xiaohui die by your hands?”

Bian Xu was one of the Four Saints, after all. As expected, he was more dignified than the elder under him. Though he was enraged by the loss of his son, he didn't lose control of himself.

Cheng Qian cast a glance towards Yang Decheng, whose eyes seemed quite gloomy, and replied, “I've clearly explained the entire story, but this Elder of your sect is quite a character. He seems to believe that everyone under the heavens who dares to have a higher cultivation than him is someone from the demonic path. Which makes me wonder, Hall Master: who is the more powerful one between you and this Elder of yours?”

Yang Decheng clenched his teeth and said, “Hall Master, don't listen to him. This little bastard has an extremely sharp tongue.”

Regarding Cheng Qian, this junior who had humiliated him in public, Yang Decheng actually wanted to kill him on the spot. He could even pin the blame of Bian Xiaohui's death on him, and everything would've been resolved nicely.

But he never thought that Zhuang Nanxi would interfere so thoroughly. That kid had sent a signal to the nearby disciples of White Tiger Mountain Village while they were occupied with their battle, instantly summoning a large group of disciples who happened to be close by — among them, there was even an elder of White Tiger Mountain Village who had hurried there upon receiving the message.

If it had just been an ‘unknown rogue cultivator’, Yang Decheng could've dealt with him however he pleased, of course. But the relationship between his sect and the White Tiger Mountain Village had spanned generations,

they truly couldn't just have a falling-out in public. The large group of White Tiger Mountain Village disciples that Cheng Qian had saved on his way all fought their hardest to mediate the conflict, turning things even more complicated, so the issue was dragged all the way to the Immortal Locking Stage, and they even ended up summoning the more prestigious cultivators of the time.

Without a change in his expression, Bian Xu continued asking, "Since Daoyou [6] has denied dabbling in the demonic arts, might I inquire whom you had studied under?"

The Fuyao Sect had always had countless grievances attached to their name, of course Cheng Qian wouldn't reveal his sect. So he said, "I'm a mere insignificant rogue cultivator."

Yang Decheng exclaimed in fury, "Bullshit!"

Bian Xu frowned. "I've been trying to be courteous, why wouldn't Daoyou show any cooperation? Then how did you come to gain your energy feel? Could it have been inborn?"

Cheng Qian placed both hands on his knees. With what could've been a smile, and also might not have been a smile, he said, "The Lecture Hall of Azure Dragon Island — if you continue asking, I can even tell you, back when Bai Ji and Tang Yao had pushed the Lord of Azure Dragon Island to his demise because of a baseless claim, I had been present. Things change with the passage of time, and even the stars have moved. Now, the bearing of this old dog that Hall Master Bian is raising is exactly just like them back then."

The moment these words were spoken, the surrounding immediately fell into an uproar. The events of Azure Dragon Island were still a topic of great debate even now, nobody could figure out whether Gu Yanxue's death had

been unjust or well-deserved. But he and Bian Xu both held the title of the Four Saints, so it was a delicate subject for Cheng Qian to bring up in this kind of setting.

Someone from Black Tortoise Hall roared, “Impudent!”

Zhuang Nanxi hurriedly said, “There indeed are skilled masters among the people. So what if this senior came from Azure Dragon Island, is the matter of the Lord of Azure Dragon Island’s Qi deviation a fact set in stone? Furthermore, judging from this senior’s age, at the time of the Island Lord’s passing, he might not even have had his energy feel yet. Doesn’t Elder Yang feel that you’re too careless?”

Yang Decheng laughed coldly, “Nephew Zhuang, have you been blinded by his small favor? Maybe the fact that you were all caught in Zhaoyang had been his scheme all along!”

Tang Zhen, who had been watching from the sidelines as a neutral party, listlessly spoke up, “He entered Zhaoyang Town to look for something in my place, rescuing the people was only done in passing. All these about schemes you’re saying... Some people shouldn’t be too imaginative.”

Yang Decheng abruptly turned around, glaring at Tang Zhen viciously. “Now who are you?”

Tang Zhen studied him expressionlessly for a moment and said, “I’m just an insignificant nobody. On the contrary, Elder Yang, I noticed that the space between your eyebrows is darkening, and there seems to be a dark red mark on your forehead. It looks like the sign of a xinmo developing. Cultivation is difficult, I advise you to avoid stirring up trouble and pay more attention to your health.”

Yang Decheng, “You...”

He had only said one word, but the sickly-looking Tang Zhen had already started coughing while holding his chest. Liulang immediately helped support his weight from the side and patted his back. It looked like this fragile cultivator was about to be frightened to death by Elder Yang, who was using his power to bully others.

Bian Xu frowned. “Decheng, don’t fuss with a junior.”

Yang Decheng was forced to withdraw his gaze, resentment still on his face. He gave a look to the Black Tortoise Hall disciples behind him. In an instant, one of the bootlicking disciples understood his meaning and spoke up for him, “Hall Master, this disciple knows of one method. Even if a demonic cultivator were to hide their bloody aura, we would still be able to expose them.”

Zhuang Nanxi and the Elder of White Tiger Mountain Village exchanged a look. Both of them had a bad feeling.

As expected, that disciple continued, “You can fake your cultivation, you can fake the energy you release, but you only need to cut open the internal cavity and look at where their primordial spirit resides. This way, we would be able to tell immediately whether they were a demonic cultivator or not.”

Before he even finished his words, the Elder of White Tiger Mountain Village had exclaimed, “Preposterous! Why don’t you say you want to cut open his chest and see if his heart is black or red? Hall Master Bian, the disciple of your sect has uttered such insolent words, aren’t you going to say anything?”

Bian Xu reached up to pinch between his brows.

Yang Decheng said in rebuff, “We’re only cutting his internal cavity open, it’s not as if we’re trying to harm his life. There are so many fellow

cultivators on the Immortal Locking Stage, could you possibly be worried that anyone is going to use some underhanded method? If he really isn't a demonic cultivator, our Black Tortoise Hall will definitely offer any herbs and medicines necessary, and guarantee that he would be good as new in an instant!"

Maybe Yang Decheng was petty, or maybe he was fooling himself and others. In any case, he wasn't trying to frame Cheng Qian, he genuinely believed that Cheng Qian was a demonic cultivator, so he was extremely self-righteous when saying all this. "Does he not dare to?"

Zhuang Nanxi, "Hall Master, the Immortal Locking Stage has never had anything like this before. I absolutely don't believe that Senior Cheng has anything to do with demonic cultivators. Even if you were to check his internal cavity, you won't find anything. If word of this spreads out, it would bring shame to the Black Tortoise Hall instead."

The Black Tortoise Hall disciple who made the ridiculous suggestion said, "You don't need to worry about this. Our Black Tortoise Hall is upright and frank, if it really were our fault, we most definitely will offer our apologies and receive any punishment, we will account for our actions!"

The Elder of White Tiger Mountain Village said, at the end of his patience, "Hall Master Bian..."

Yang Decheng forcefully cut him off, "Not daring to do it means he's guilty!"

Cheng Qian, "..."

The person in question hadn't even gotten to say anything, but these two sides already seemed ready to fight each other.

Right then, a voice suddenly came from outside the hall of the Immortal Locking Stage, “Guilty? I’d love to see who dares to lay a finger on him!”

Before those words were completely spoken, a person had barged in alone carrying a sword. Even before his arrival, the sword aura around him had already swept through the entire hall.

Cheng Qian’s expression finally shifted.

[1] ‘*Shizhou*’ The word used here is , which means ‘ten divisions’.

[2] ‘*Jiuzhou*’ The word used here is , which means ‘nine divisions’. It’s a poetic name for China.

[3] ‘*Ji Qianli*’ The name used here, , sounds like , which means ‘several / how many thousand li’.

[4] ‘*sat with his legs crossed*’ The phrase used here is , which would translate to something like ‘five centers facing the sky’. The ‘five centers ()’ here are the centers of the palms (), the undersides of the feet (), and the crown of the head (). The phrase refers to a sitting position that is used in meditation. It’s similar to how you would sit on the ground with your legs crossed, but you need to position both your feet in such a way that the undersides of your feet are facing up. The palms of your hands and the crown of your head must also face up. This is a picture of what it looks like:

https://inews.gtimg.com/newsapp_bt/0/7600639233/1000

Here's another picture of how it looks when a real person does it, though it's worth noting that when the Buddha is depicted in paintings and statues with this position, the hands are usually placed on the lap, just like in the first picture:

<http://img1.how01.com/imgs/4e/29/a/3e6a00002772d5e3528f.jpg>

[5] '*Once the most powerful people of their times, but what has become of them now?*' The phrase used here is *wo yu zhi jin zai na*, which comes from *Ode to the Red Cliff*, in reference to Cao Cao. A more literal translation would be, 'He was once the most powerful person of his age, but where is he now?' There is no subject in the original Chinese text, so you can use 'he' or 'they' depending on who you're referring to.

[6] '*Daoyou*' The word used here is *daoyou*. It's a form of address used for fellow cultivators. I listed this term in the [character guide](#), but just in case you haven't seen it, I'll include this note here too.

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Under Shizhou Mountain, Shuikeng had transformed into a gigantic bird, carrying Li Yun on her back as she swept past quickly in the sky. If anyone were to see her, they would've thought that a ray of sunlight had shot past.

The two of them were like a comet [1] with a long tail, a large crowd of various demonic cultivators chasing after them. But the Vermilion Crane's route wasn't a straight line. She kept dodging left and right, occasionally taking the longer path, putting all sorts of techniques to use. All along the way, she skillfully kept the demonic cultivators at her tails.

After receiving the notification from Tang Zhen the other day, Yan Zhengming had taken off before them without any room for argument. But they heard that cultivators from all over the place had gathered at the Immortal-Locking Stage, how could Da-shixiong face them all by himself? Li Yun had no choice but to use up his wicked tricks. Taking advantage of the fact that demonic cultivators had gathered north following the demonic dragon, they provoked a large crowd of screaming demonic cultivators along the way. Then, making use of Shuikeng's speed, they lured them all the way up Shizhou Mountain, planning to thoroughly create confusion there.

Li Yun directed Shuikeng while making calculations, "Seventeen *zhang* ahead, kan [2] position — ah you missed, careful!"

Shuikeng said, irritated, "Don't show off that you've read some books, what's wrong with just saying 'front, back, left, right'?"

She was basically only able to figure out ‘front, back, left, right’, and had to ponder for a while just to figure out ‘east, west, south, north’. Li Yun spouting these directions using the Eight Trigrams was truly giving her a headache.

“Stop blabbing, it’s right there, hurry!” Li Yun complained, “Can’t you reign in this fire on your body, it’s so hot I’m dying!”

Shuikeng didn’t argue with him, anxiously asking, “Er-shixiong, can Da-shixiong wait until we get there?”

“Stop joking. Xiao-Qian’s in trouble, can you hope for him to stay calm?” Li Yun sighed, “If Xiao-Qian was completely fine, it might be alright. But if he was the slightest bit hurt, ah...”

Shuikeng, without really understanding what he meant, said indignantly, “What? If anyone dares to hurt my Little Shixiong, I’ll definitely burn them to death!”

Li Yun, “...”

As a *yao*, she might have been among the more intelligent ones, but as a human, she still had a long way to go. Her brain was about as simple as her limbs were developed. After being rendered speechless for a moment, Li Yun decided that he couldn’t properly explain this matter to her, so he said powerlessly, “Just keep flying. If we end up getting caught, it won’t be fun for either of us.”

His heart was filled with worry. He was afraid that Yan Zhengming would let his anger get the better of him and barge into the Immortal-Locking Stage just like that.

Li Yun understood their Sect Leader, after all.

On the hall of the Immortal-Locking Stage, the murderous sword aura indiscriminately swept through. All of the formidable masters present subconsciously shifted their energy to defend against it. The Dragon Locks were agitated, their light brightening and dimming, their own energy clashing against the sword aura. The four doors were blown up with a loud bang.

“Who!”

Yan Zhengming’s expression was icy as he entered through the destroyed door. Without sparing even a single glance, he ignored all the people present and walked straight toward the Immortal-Locking Stage.

As if everything else around him wasn’t even worthy of mention, and the only thing that mattered to him was that person surrounded by the Dragon Locks.

Cheng Qian’s earlier composure had long since disappeared completely. For a moment, he had a feeling like he had been caught red-handed immediately after getting into trouble, and his wound-laden back involuntarily tensed. He subconsciously looked down at his unsalvageable tattered clothes, and pulled up a piece of rag in a futile attempt to cover the bruise on his waist.

Yan Zhengming came to the side of the Immortal-Locking Stage. As if there was nobody else around them, he stared at the bloodstains on Cheng Qian’s body and said softly, “Who hurt you?”

His tone was gentle, his expression was normal, but Cheng Qian suddenly felt his hairs standing on end. He looked at Yan Zhengming uncertainly and found a hint of ominous red within his black irises. “Shixiong, you...”

Yan Zhengming exhaled lightly. “I’ve made an oath to the heavens, if anyone hurts you again, I will tear them to...”

Fear rose in Cheng Qian's heart hearing those words. He didn't dare let this seemingly insane Shixiong of his finish those words and cut him off, carefully coaxing him, "I'm fine, we just had a little misunderstanding, calm down a little, okay? Where is Er-shixiong's group?"

Yan Zhengming's teeth were clenched so tightly, the strain was visible on his cheeks. After a moment, he forcefully blinked his eyes. The faint dark red in his irises finally started to fade away.

Yan Zhengming sighed and spoke in a low voice, as if worn out, "Come here, let me see."

Cheng Qian stood and walked to the sides of the Dragon Locks, as if there was nothing wrong. His movements were normal, and his steps were light. It was as if the various wounds on his body had simply been painted on.

He clasped both hands behind his back and swept his gaze toward the surrounding cultivators with their varying expressions. His eyebrows suddenly rose, an arrogant look that hadn't graced his face in so long finally making its appearance again as he smiled, "It's just a small dispute, it would've been solved with a few words exchanged. Why did you come all the way here?"

Yan Zhengming stared at him, at how he was still putting on a show when he looked so pale. The rioting xinmo in his internal cavity calmed down slightly. After regaining his senses, he started feeling angry.

Yan Zhengming glared at Cheng Qian viciously, giving him a gaze that said 'just you wait', and turned around. He tapped the new sword in his hand against the ground and said, "If he owes anyone money, I will return it. If he has killed anyone's man, I will pay with my life — now who are the ones intending to demand payment, come to me at once."

Even though he was a rare powerful sword cultivator, this brazen declaration of his still stunned everyone.

After a long while, Zhuang Nanxi, who had quite some trouble grasping the situation, finally came back to himself and spoke up first, “This... this senior is...”

Yan Zhengming said, “My surname is Yan, I’m the forty-eighth leader of Fuyao Sect.”

Cheng Qian didn’t expect him to declare it in public just like that, so he was shocked. “Shixiong!”

With his back to Cheng Qian, Yan Zhengming waved him off. This day would come sooner or later, could Fuyao Sect hide for a lifetime?

When these words left his mouth, most of the cultivators present seemed extremely confused. But the older ones like Bian Xu, Yang Decheng, and the Elder of White Tiger Mountain Village all looked astonished.

The Elder of White Tiger Mountain Village asked, “Then, your master is...”

“My master is Han Muchun, Shizu is Tong Ru... he seems to have some relations with the Four Saints.” Yan Zhengming paused before continuing, “Our seniors are no longer here, and have left the sect to this lowly one. I’m extremely incompetent, even after cultivating for more than a hundred years, I couldn’t produce any meaningful achievements, so we’ve always been ashamed to reveal our origins.”

After speaking this far, his fingertips tapped the scabbard of his sword, producing a light clink. Yan Zhengming put on a self-deprecating look, but it seemed like there was nobody else around him as he spoke without even looking up, “But no matter how much of a coward I am, I can’t possibly

stand around watching the lot of you bully my Shidi, so I've come to receive what lessons you may offer."

Yang Decheng snorted loudly, "If I remembered correctly, hasn't your Fuyao Sect always claimed to 'eliminate any evil beings that you encounter'? Why don't you cleanse the filth in your sect first?"

Hearing this, Yan Zhengming raised his eyes. "Oh?"

He had always had the peach-blossom eyes of a profligate young master. Even before he opened his mouth, the corners of his eyes would already carry some frivolousness of the mortal world, yet these eyes also contained the sword aura of Point-break. It was like a feather turned into a blade, dripping water turned into ice. There was an indescribable out-of-place feeling, yet it was also strangely fitting.

The Black Tortoise Hall disciple next to Yang Decheng, who had suggested cutting Cheng Qian's internal cavity open, came forward to explain the chain of events with plenty of embellishments.

After listening with an expressionless face, Yan Zhengming lowered his face to look at his own sword, and suddenly gave a light laugh. "Oh, I understand, so it's this Elder Yang — your young master had been possessed by a xinmo, his physical body had died by my hand, it has nothing to do with my Shidi. If everyone believes that I had committed blasphemy against the corpse, I can personally kowtow in front of his cenotaph. As for..."

With only the briefest delay after saying 'as for', he had already come in front of Yang Decheng, his primordial spirit sword joining with the sword in his hand. Without caring that his own back was wide open, without even a word of greeting, his attack bore down on Yang Decheng.

He had heard this person's declaration as soon as he entered, and after hearing the full story, he concluded that Cheng Qian's hair tie had broken at the hands of this old bastard. Immediately, he felt enraged.

If he hadn't tied a Puppet Charm to Cheng Qian's body on a whim, if the people of White Tiger Mountain Village hadn't been there to interfere, would Cheng Qian still have a life left in him?

The resentment of being unable to kill Zhou Hanzheng himself a hundred years ago burned in his heart. So many old and new grudges piled up together, that even if the Heavenly King himself were to stand in the way, he couldn't stop Yan Zhengming from ripping this person to shreds.

The sword in Yan Zhengming's hand made a sharp ringing sound, as if unable to withstand the overwhelming force of its wielder. Yang Decheng, the proud Great Elder of Black Tortoise Hall, was unable to meet the attack head-on, and was miserably forced back. Even Bian Xu, one of the Four Saints, couldn't help moving aside to dodge that blade.

This strike seemed as if it could pierce through the heavens —

But Cheng Qian's brows knitted. In fact, he couldn't help stepping forward, and was blocked by the Dragon Locks.

Cheng Qian was well aware of these people's skill levels. Even if Yan Zhengming were to take ten enhancing pills at once, he definitely wouldn't have the ability to attack like this. Only a few days had passed, but this Dashixiong of his — who appeared light-hearted, but in reality, was the most weighed down by worries — what exactly had he done?

The entire hall was swept through by his strike. Other than the place encircled by the Dragon Locks, everywhere else was affected by the attack.

The surrounding protective charms were about as useful as a pile of mud. In an instant, the walls had collapsed.

When the earlier generations had built the Immortal-Locking Stage, they must've never thought that anyone would dare to be so impudent.

The Elder of White Tiger Mountain Village hurriedly said, "Nephew, don't..."

Yang Decheng couldn't dodge, so with a low exclamation, he made a seal with his hands. Eighteen phantom figures abruptly appeared from behind him, each holding eighteen different weapons. Some were extremely powerful, while others were extremely agile. They charged forward from all directions, surrounding Yan Zhengming within their formation.

Suddenly, the flash of a sword blazed brightly. The sword and the primordial spirit sword joined to form a rain of blades, until it was hard to tell them apart. The eighteen phantoms couldn't escape the flashing swords, and were turned into ashes on the spot. Yang Decheng already had some fear in his heart to begin with, and received backlash from his own phantoms. He was thrown back more than two *zhang* and fell motionless. It wasn't clear whether he was alive or dead.

Yan Zhengming persistently chased after him. Bian Xu was finally forced to act. He made a seal with his hand to release a jade shield, which stood in front of Yang Decheng.

The sword aura struck a corner of the jade shield, producing a crack on the surface. Yan Zhengming glanced at the Master of Black Tortoise Hall, smiling coldly. Without a warning, the sword figures around him turned in another direction along with him, and went for the thirty-six Dragon Locks.

“Stop!” This time, Bian Xu, the Elder of White Tiger Mountain Village, and even Cheng Qian practically spoke as one.

But nobody could stand in the way of this sword cultivator’s persistence.

When the primordial spirit sword clashed with the Dragon Locks, it seemed as if there was the long roar of a dragon within the Dragon Locks. What little remained from the roof of the hall was instantly blown away. All the cultivators present, each of whom would’ve qualified as a formidable master in their own right, could only cower in fear.

The Dragon Locks had endured countless years of merciless weather, they had been imbued with the energy of countless formidable masters, and had tasted the blood of countless demonic cultivators. They had long since formed their own spirit, both profound and dignified, and also scornfully arrogant. Neither side was willing to back down.

A thin thread of blood was leaking out of the corner of Yan Zhengming’s lips. The dark red that faded from his eyes earlier was brought out again by the Dragon Locks. In the blink of an eye, a second sword had been formed, which also struck down on the Dragon Locks.

Maybe the reason that the lazy young master of Fuyao Mountain could enter the Dao through the sword was because of this piercing coldness within him — in a certain instant at a certain moment, he would disregard everything, be it the heavens, the earth, men, or even gods.

While searching for the chants to unlock the Mountain-Sealing Decree, he was also constantly trying to fight the consciousness left in the Sect Leader’s Seal by the generations of previous sect leaders.

Though he hated dirtiness, exhaustion, and troublesome things, he had never been so truly frightened that he couldn’t step forward.

The Dragon Locks roared in fury. The Immortal-Locking Stage was trembling.

The Elder of White Tiger Mountain Village turned to howl at Bian Xu, his entire tone changing, “This sword cultivator has entered the territory of sword gods, why would he go out of his way to kill that useless son of yours? To hell with your unaccommodating immortal act, are you still not opening the Immortal-Locking Stage!”

Bian Xu admitted that those words were the truth, but even if he really wanted to open the Immortal-Locking Stage, he was unable to do so at the moment — with his cultivation, of course he could hold his ground against Yan Zhengming, but if he were to barge into the mad flurry of swords at this moment, they might end up with both parties injured.

Right then, Cheng Qian suddenly knelt on the Immortal-Locking Stage. “Shixiong, I’m begging you, please stop!”

As soon as Cheng Qian fell to his knees, light suddenly flashed in Yan Zhengming’s apathetic eyes. The sword aura had already taken form, but when he paused, it also stopped in the air.

Cheng Qian, “Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

In the silence of the crowd, the limitless sword aura gradually dispersed, turning into a breeze, returning into Yan Zhengming’s sword.

Yan Zhengming was silent for a moment before saying in a low voice, “Open the Dragon Locks.”

The present cultivators all looked at each other. The Elder of White Tiger Mountain Village hurriedly came forward first, “I have one of the keys.”

The thirty-six keys to the Dragon Locks were kept by each of the thirty-six cultivators who had been invited there. With his lead, everyone else immediately followed suit. Even Bian Xu, after a moment of hesitation, reluctantly raised his hand to summon a key, which he tossed to a disciple next to him.

As each of the Dragon Locks were released, the stagnant energy in Cheng Qian's body finally started to regulate itself again. His meridians felt like a long-dried river abruptly filled with water, the sudden influx causing him some soreness.

Bian Xu cleared his throat, about to say something. Suddenly, darkness emerged from the north, covering up a large portion of the skies in the blink of an eye. The hall around the cultivators had collapsed, so their field of vision became clearer instead. They all turned to look, and saw the faint figure of a dragon within the dark clouds.

Someone exclaimed, "The demonic dragon of Nanjiang!"

Right then, a large bird with flames all over its body charged up the mountain with a long cry, stopping at the ruins that used to be the hall. Li Yun jumped down from the bird's back, breathing heavily. Seeing this scene, he was a bit bewildered for a moment, and murmured to himself, "Isn't that... what's going on here?"

The clouds were rumbling like the portent of upcoming perils. From within, Han Yuan's voice came like muffled thunder, "I'm the one who had destroyed the Scarlet Bird Tower, the great xinmo was also my doing... Who is the insignificant nobody that dares to claim credit for my deeds?"

As he spoke, the dark aura surrounding Shizhou Mountain kept churning. A large crowd of demonic cultivators had chased them from under the mountain.

Li Yun finally evened out his breath and hurriedly explained with a deprecating smile, “We encountered a large group of demonic cultivators, they had chased us really persistently.”

Nobody paid any attention to his self-mockery.

Around them, the endless demonic energy was spreading out. The Immortal-Locking Stage quaked as the demonic dragon laughed, “This world should’ve long since undergone some changes, join me and transform these lands —”

The demonic cultivators around them all cheered in response.

The demonic dragon’s gigantic claw cut through the clouds, as if tearing through the entire sky. Heavy rain instantly started pouring down.

On top of the mountain, the winds were violent, rain was falling heavily. Under the mountain, demonic cultivators were rejoicing. Shizhou Mountain had fallen into chaos.

Zhuang Nanxi came forward with large steps, forcefully wiping the rain water on his face as he called out to Yan Zhengming, “Senior! This junior is ignorant and inexperienced, and has never heard of the great Fuyao Sect’s name, but didn’t someone say that Fuyao will eliminate any evil beings that you encounter? Everywhere under the heavens has fallen into turmoil, could anyone stay uninvolved?”

Cheng Qian didn’t know if it was his imagination, but he thought Yan Zhengming’s body seemed to have swayed.

Zhuang Nanxi said, presenting his views vehemently, “Seniors, please put the well-being of the world first, and set aside our small disagreements!”

Cheng Qian turned around. It was as if his eyes had met Han Yuan's amid the pouring rain and the thick dark clouds. In that instant, as he heard the declarations to defend the Dao from the cultivators around him, a certain feeling rose in his chest.

They could never turn back now.

Fuyao Sect had reappeared before the people after so many years of hiding, and had fallen to the heart of the struggle once more. Their lazy prankster little Shidi was also getting farther and farther away. They could never turn back now.

The demonic cultivator that must appear in each generation, the ancient teaching of eliminating any evil beings that they come across.

"Everyone trying to act the hero, out of the way." Right then, Tang Zhen suddenly parted the crowd to come over. "Can't you see he's barely able to stand?"

Before he even finished his words, Yan Zhengming had collapsed without a warning.

Cheng Qian could no longer think about those things and hurriedly reached out to catch Yan Zhengming, but he could only feel coldness in his hands. Yan Zhengming's breathing was so shallow, it was almost unnoticeable.

Zhuang Nanxi was stunned. Right then, an unknown cultivator came forward carefully, "Please... Please follow me, Seniors. There's a resting place on Shizhou Mountain."

Tang Zhen said, "Please lead the way, this madman was injured by the Dragon Locks earlier."

After saying so, he gave Cheng Qian a look, signaling him to follow.

Cheng Qian hurriedly picked Yan Zhengming up. Li Yun and Shuikeng immediately followed. None of the cultivators all over the mountain dared to stop them.

Cheng Qian quickly caught up to Tang Zhen, “Tang-xiong, my Shixiong...”

“Hurry, don’t ask,” Tang Zhen’s voice was barely above a whisper, “Back then, I saw White Tiger Mountain Village summoning their disciples, went to look into it, and notified your Shixiong’s group. Other than asking for the location of the Immortal-Locking Stage, he also asked me about a forbidden technique.”

Cheng Qian’s chest tightened. “What?”

“Increasing his own cultivation to its highest extremes for a short while, and receiving three times the backlash afterwards... Ah, I thought your Shixiong was an easygoing one,” Tang Zhen frowned, “If I had known he was this type of person, I wouldn’t have given it to him.”

Cheng Qian was stunned.

His entire mind was shaken for a moment. He looked at Yan Zhengming’s sallow face, and couldn’t quite figure out the feeling in his chest.

In a daze, Cheng Qian felt the words that Zhuang Nanxi had said in the past resound within his chest, as if trying to break free —

In this world, as long as it doesn’t go against the morals, there is nothing that I wouldn’t do for him [3].

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[1] ‘comet’ The word used here is , which can also mean ‘bearer of ill luck’.

[2] ‘kan’ The word used here is , one of the Eight Trigrams () which represents water, and is supposed to point north, according to the following image:

<http://p1.pstatp.com/large/a9f0003038b3d06f381>

A full list of the Eight Trigrams would be:

	South	li	Fire
	Southwest	kun	Earth
	West	dui	Marsh
	Northwest	qian	Heaven
	North	kan	Water
	Northeast	gen	Mountain
	East	zhen	Thunder
	Southeast	xun	Wind

[3] *'In this world, as long as it doesn't go against the morals, there is nothing that I wouldn't do for him'* In Chinese, the third person pronoun for men (他) and women (她) are read the same way, so when said out loud, there is no difference between 'him' and 'her'. That's why Zhuang Nanxi's words in chapter 69 are read the same as this line here.

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It was said that the night of that day, the flood dragon at the entrance of Xixing Palace had died, its white belly floating on the surface of the water.

The hall of the Immortal-Locking Stage had been blown to bits. After the Dragon Locks were released, only an empty stage was left behind. When it was drenched in the heavy rain, even the water flowing down carried the scent of blood.

The demonic cultivators under Shizhou Mountain had wreaked havoc for an entire night, each fighting their own battles. They fought many rounds against the cultivators on the mountain, throwing the entire place into chaos. The beasts in the forest fled at the mere sight of the oncoming trouble, and countless villages under the mountain were affected. But this matter wasn't related to bandits, so not only were the authorities unable to deal with it, they also had to escape with the people.

The imperial court's response was remarkably fast. The next day, the Office of Heavenly Affairs had already sent people there, but the effect of this was just shy of doing nothing at all — cultivators from respectable sects all thought highly of themselves, would any of them care about the imperial court's assignments? The demonic cultivators of Nanjiang were even more unbridled. They had a lot of people on their side, and after wreaking havoc in one place, they would move to another location. It seemed like they didn't have any particular demands, and were only causing disasters because they could.

Shizhou Mountain, which had the greatest view under the heavens, had encountered such a disaster. There were corpses and bones scattered all over the place. Water sources everywhere were polluted by diseases and poison

from the corpses, causing countless commoners to be forced out of their homes.

The cultivators had no qualms when they fought, repeatedly making use of the Qi of the heavens and the earth, causing chaos within the five elements. One moment they'd be summoning water, then, in the next moment they'd be setting things on fire. The next instant, snow would fall, and then the flowers of summer would be forced to bloom in the snow. Looking haggard, these flowers would come face-to-face with the confused winter crickets in the ground.

After three to four days of this chaos, they finally summoned the wrath of the heavens and the earth. One of the bolts from the Divine Thunders had split the Immortal-Locking Stage in two.

It seemed to signify the beginning of the war between the gods and the demons, the collapse of order in the world.

Bian Xu didn't linger at all, returning to Black Tortoise Hall as soon as he left the Immortal-Locking Stage. Then he immediately announced his seclusion, and refused to show his face no matter who came to see him.

The Master of White Tiger Mountain Village never appeared from the beginning to the end. Be it the secret investigation of Nanjiang, or dealing with the matter on the Immortal-Locking Stage, he only sent a group of disciples and an elder who would cuss out 'useless son' when agitated. There was even a rumor that the reason the Master of White Tiger Mountain Village never showed his face was because he had long since passed away.

At this point, the Four Saints, who had once guarded the lands like four Heavenly Pillars, had all gone their own ways, be it to death or obscurity. Following their departure from the stage, it seemed as if a long, peaceful period had also ended.

The world was in turmoil, the common people and cultivators all found themselves in danger.

The tall towers, as well as the music and song that played through the nights, all seemed like the ornate and fragile carvings on ice. With just some water thrown on it, everything would immediately turn indistinct.

But Cheng Qian couldn't be bothered to care about those things.

That day, he had left the Immortal-Locking Stage with Tang Zhen, stopping at a simple inn under Shizhou Mountain. It was the first time he witnessed what it was like to receive backlash from one's own energy.

When the backlash acted up, blue veins would pop up on Yan Zhengming's temples, as if about to burst out of his skin. His hand unconsciously gripped the sides of the stone bed, a pained grunt sounding from his throat. The stone bed, which was half as thick as a person's palm, was reduced to dust under his fingers.

Tang Zhen said loudly, "The younger ones should all get out, this isn't a game. Those without primordial spirits should also stay away... ugh!"

Before he could finish his words, a gigantic sword aura suddenly burst out of Yan Zhengming's body. No matter who was standing in the way, there was no way to stand against the ice-cold density of a sword aura from the territory of sword gods.

Tang Zhen's breath was stuck in his chest as he was forced back a few steps, his face a horrible color. He reached up to cradle his own tumultuous chest.

The entire inn was shaking, as if on the verge of collapsing. Popping sounds came from the pillars. Without any trace of its presence, the sword aura had

left a deep cut on the wood and stone just from brushing against them.

Tang Zhen reached out to grab Cheng Qian's shoulder. His skinny fingers mercilessly dug into a wound there, sending a sharp spark through Cheng Qian's body.

“Don't space out. I can't handle his sword aura, we need to count on you. You can't let his entire energy leak out. Otherwise, not only would his physical body be unable to withstand the wounds from the Dragon Locks, the surrounding area spanning many *li* would also be affected, nobody would be able to escape!”

Cheng Qian immediately came back to himself, spreading out his energy, enveloping the entire inn within. It turned into an invisible net, containing Yan Zhengming's sword aura.

But he himself was only good at fighting. Be it taking care of other people's wounds or supporting others, he had never done anything of the sort before. While his internal cavity took on the unconscious attacks from a sword cultivator, he had to be careful not to add to the other person's wounds. Both parties immediately came to a deadlock. Only half an incense stick had been burned, but sweat was visibly forming on Cheng Qian's temples.

Yan Zhengming powerlessly lay on the stone bed, feeling as if he was being cut up by thousands of blades. He couldn't even voice his pain.

He seemed to be awake, but his gaze was unfocused. His consciousness was hazy, he couldn't even figure out where he was. He futilely attempted to grab something with his already convulsing fingers. To him, it felt like he had used his entire strength, but only the tip of his finger had trembled slightly. His bloodless lips opened and closed slightly, as if calling out 'Xiao-Qian'.

Tang Zhen made a complicated seal with both hands. The next moment, Cheng Qian sensed a clear breeze, which felt like warm water, flowing past his side. The wound and bruise on his waist, having brushed against it, were instantly healed.

The clear breeze entirely sunk into Yan Zhengming's body. Yan Zhengming gave a slight twitch. Then his back violently rose for a moment, as he was starting to regain his consciousness slightly. Tang Zhen's complexion immediately turned ashen, as if he had gone through death.

While Yan Zhengming still had some awareness in him, Tang Zhen hurriedly said, "Sect Leader Yan, restrain your sword aura!"

Yan Zhengming had actually heard it, but he was powerless to act. It felt like every *cun* of his bones and flesh had been chopped off as he thought absently, *Shifu, cultivating with the sword is so painful, I don't want to cultivate ever again.*

Tang Zhen turned to Cheng Qian, cold sweat dripping from his face, "We can't stall anymore!"

Cheng Qian clenched his teeth as he abruptly withdrew his own energy, forcing the scattered sword aura back. The sword aura kept colliding with the inside of the net, the blades ringing within his internal cavity. For a moment, it felt as if he had been stabbed through by thousands of arrows.

Li Yun, who was waiting at the door, felt an intense light suddenly bursting out from inside. After a heavy quake, the window was covered with a layer of frost in the blink of an eye, completely frozen.

Li Yun pulled the peering Shuikeng back and pushed the frozen door of the inn open —

Cheng Qian was kneeling on one knee, holding Yan Zhengming tightly. A good half of the tattered rags on his body had been drenched with blood, wetly clinging to his body. Li Yun stepped forward tremblingly, calling out in a light voice, "Xiao-Qian?"

Cheng Qian seemed like he wanted to stand, but he lost his footing. Li Yun immediately burst into the room to support him. "You're much too reckless!"

Cheng Qian couldn't say anything for a moment.

"It's alright, for now." Tang Zhen stood with some difficulty, throwing a heavy look to the unconscious Yan Zhengming. "We'll leave the rest to luck."

They didn't linger on Shizhou Mountain. With only a slight rest for Cheng Qian, they set out to Fuyao Mountain Village the next morning, borrowing Tang Zhen's flying horse carriage.

Since flying horses had graceful postures and were quite timid, they were so frightened that they didn't dare to move. They could only let Shuikeng personally take the reins, roasting the horses' rears with the flames of the Vermilion Crane. The two horses were ushered so hard that they loudly jumped in fury, flying wildly like blind birds.

Tang Zhen had long since been thoroughly worn out, and had fallen asleep leaning against a corner. When he was awake, his features were gentle and he looked quite elegant, but when he was asleep, even his living aura was extremely faint. There was a faint aged ghastly air about him.

Nian Dada was keeping himself entertained on one side. Liulang said nothing. Li Yun silently sat against the carriage door, his entire person shrouded in an unspeakable heaviness.

Cheng Qian held the completely unconscious Yan Zhengming, leaning against the carriage wall. He saw no shred of pain on Yan Zhengming's face. It was as if he had simply been bored out of his mind by lectures, and had fallen asleep in the misty Mission Hall.

Cheng Qian recalled that when he was young, Shifu had arranged for him to live in the Qing'an Dwelling, so he could have the peace to relieve his unease, and would stop thinking too much. Then why was Da-shixiong arranged to live in the 'Land of the Tender'?

Had Shifu foreseen that in his life, he would only be able to remain carefree in his youth?

Outside the carriage, the winds and rains roared. The Vermilion Crane's flames were like a shaky lamp on the verge of falling, weakly cutting through the wet skies of the human realm.

Right then, Liulang, who had been staring out the window, suddenly broke the silence, "When I realized that I had ended up in this form, neither a human nor a ghost, I had wanted to give up on life once."

He almost never spoke in front of others. As time passed, the people around him thought that his voice was lost after being possessed by the demonic cultivator, and he had turned into a mute.

"Being a common person isn't so bad." Nian Dada yawned. He was a bit more awake afterward, and continued, "Being born, aging, falling sick, and dying. Living an idyllic gardening life, then enjoying a happy and leisurely life playing with your grandkids when you've grown old, and finally being buried in the ancestral tomb with your ancestors. Then in your next life, you're back to being a baby who is loved and spoiled by your parents."

Liulang's face was hidden by the mask, so there was no telling what kind of expression he had. He only looked at Nian Dada glumly and said in a low voice, "You don't understand what it's like to be a common person. With only a seal from your hands, you could summon the winds and rains, floodwater rising to the heavens, without a care for where all that water would go. But what about the common people under the mountain? When they went to sleep, everything was still fine, but when they woke up, they'd find that their homes and farms had been destroyed in one night. You've worked hard all your life for this meager estate, and all of it is now gone."

Nian Dada was stunned. "That's..."

"Those are the more fortunate ones, at least they still have their lives left in them to leave their homes," Liulang said, "The rest might have been crushed by their collapsing homes in their sleep, or mistakenly killed by the soldiers, or died without a burial because they had gotten in some demonic cultivator's way... Everyone only ever talked about the victors and losers of a battle, about which hero had killed how many demonic cultivators. Nobody would mention the others."

Liulang laughed in a low voice, "Just like how people might step on ants on the ground. Normally, people wouldn't go out of their way to step on them, but even if they did, nobody would notice."

"That's nothing, really," Li Yun said wearily, "All living creatures are just like ants. Some might treat others as ants, so they could temporarily forget that they themselves were also ants. The happiness, anger, grief, and joy in the human world have never been up to humans — just face each day as they come... Look at our sect leader. A sword cultivator who has entered the territory of sword gods, other people would hide away if they saw him, but doesn't he also live each day in agony?"

The word ‘agony’ seemed to have struck a nerve in Cheng Qian. He lowered his head and raised one of Yan Zhengming’s hands, pressing on his weak pulse. Since way back, he had been able to feel Da-shixiong’s pain, but he had never felt this person be so weak. Only by looking on, he could feel an uneasy sorrow in his heart.

A long while passed, but Cheng Qian couldn’t sense anything useful. His own energy was extremely cold, so he didn’t dare to go inside someone else’s internal cavity carelessly. So, without caring if Tang Zhen was asleep, he asked, “When will he wake up?”

Tang Zhen answered with his eyes closed, “I don’t know. He’s receiving backlash from his own internal cavity, and his xinmo is acting up. He might cough up some blood and wake up by himself in a moment, or he might never wake up again and die just like that. There’s no telling.”

As soon as these words were spoken, the carriage went quiet again. Even the noisy Nian Dada didn’t dare to make another sound.

Tang Zhen’s cursed mouth once again proved its ability of speaking misfortunes into existence. Almost a month had passed since they returned to Fuyao Mountain Village, but Yan Zhengming had remained like a living corpse the entire time.

Even though Tang Zhen didn’t actually promise anything, he probably felt that since he was the one who had given the forbidden technique to Yan Zhengming, he should take some responsibility. So he stayed in Fuyao Mountain Village along with Nian Dada and Liulang. Occasionally, he would give Li Yun directions on how to strengthen the arrays outside the mountain village, and would check on Yan Zhengming’s condition once every few days.

Tang Zhen walked into the bamboo forest with great familiarity. He picked up the cup of cool water on the table, drank all of its contents, and spoke to the waiting Cheng Qian, “You’ve gone through seven Heavenly Tribulations, your physical body has been formed, why do you still maintain such restraint over your desires?”

“Force of habit.” Cheng Qian silently sat on the side. After a moment, for some unknown reason, he added, “In the past, I had thought that there wasn’t much meaning in living if your blood has gone cold. But from what I can see now, having too many desires might not necessarily be a good thing.”

“I just saw that people have come to your mountain village again,” Tang Zhen said, “Your place has really become as crowded as a marketplace these days — but that makes sense. The formidable masters from everywhere have mostly passed on, and your sect has made such a scene at the Immortal-Locking Stage that everyone under the heavens has caught word of it. In these turbulent days, of course they would flock to you.”

Cheng Qian didn’t even raise his eyes as he spoke bitingly, “In a mountain with no tiger, the monkey proclaims himself king.”

He didn’t seem to care in the least that he was also cursing himself out with those words.

Tang Zhen gave him a look and said, “It seems that the visitors were from White Tiger Mountain Village, aren’t you going to meet them?”

Cheng Qian said indifferently, “Their own Village Master is playing dead, what are they coming to me for?”

Tang Zhen, “It seems like there’s a message from the Office of Heavenly Affairs too.”

Cheng Qian's face abruptly darkened. "If anyone from the Office of Heavenly Affairs dares to come, beat them back. If they still don't know their places, make it so they can't return. What business do they have with me?"

What business do they have?

Han Yuan coming from the Fuyao Sect would become a well-known fact soon enough. When the time comes, could they still hope to stay uninvolved?

But Yan Zhengming had remained unconscious all this time, and Cheng Qian was also growing restless with anxiety. Tang Zhen didn't touch on his sore spot and dropped the topic. He came forward and sent a shred of his consciousness into Yan Zhengming's internal cavity.

The Great Immortal Cheng, who had been all about 'maintaining restraint over your desires' earlier, leaned forward and asked, "How is he?"

Tang Zhen didn't say anything for a long while. Cheng Qian couldn't sit still and paced around the room numerous times. He wanted to ask again a few times, but didn't want to be a bother, so he swallowed his questions back down.

After a while, Tang Zhen finally withdrew his consciousness, attentively putting Yan Zhengming's hand back under the blanket. His expression was heavy as he hesitated slightly.

Cheng Qian, "Tang-xiong?"

Tang Zhen, "I think... it would be better if you call your Shixiong and Shimei over."

For a moment, Cheng Qian was rooted into place.

He had never felt his chest turn so cold. It was as if someone had dug out the contents of his chest and stuffed it with ice, the pain so great that it felt like fresh blood was dripping.

Maybe this was what it felt like to be struck by thunder.

Tang Zhen gave him an awkward look, “Xiaoyou, in this world, there will be times when things don’t go as you wish, and there will always be joy as well as pain. You’ve maintained restraint over your desires for so long, have you still not seen through this all?”

“No...”

Cheng Qian had only uttered one word, but his voice had already cracked. He stood in place for a moment, at a loss and helpless. It seemed like he wanted to step forward, but his foot staggered. His gaze slowly fell on Yan Zhengming’s body. There was a brief instant, in which Tang Zhen felt like Cheng Qian’s eyes had reddened — but... could a piece of jade possibly cry?

Could that gaze, which had never wavered in the face of Heavenly Tribulations, possibly lose its composure?

But it was only for a split second. Before Tang Zhen could say anything, Cheng Qian’s gaze abruptly hardened as he spoke resolutely, “No, don’t tell them yet. Tang-xiong, you’re greatly knowledgeable, you must have a way. I’ll do anything, be it going up into the heavens or down into the underworld, even if you want me to give a life for a life, I’ll do anything...”

Tang Zhen cut him off, “Listen to those impudent words of yours. If your Shixiong were to hear them, he would definitely cut you down himself, and

then do the same to me.”

Cheng Qian stared at Tang Zhen with an almost pressing calmness. “I could cultivate the Spirit-Condensing Jade into a physical body. If you will show me the way, there is nothing that I can’t do.”

Tang Zhen returned his gaze. There wasn’t the slightest hesitation in Cheng Qian’s eyes.

“Up into the heavens... or down into the underworld.” Tang Zhen suddenly muttered these words in a low voice. Then, he gave a low chuckle.

“Xiaoyou, the profound camaraderie within sects in the world is undoubtedly a much-told tale, but it’s rare to see profoundness like yours.”

Cheng Qian said without batting an eyelid, “This place is called ‘Fuyao Mountain Village’, not ‘the world’.”

“There are many dangers in the territory of sword gods. You and I can never understand them, as outsiders,” Tang Zhen didn’t continue the earlier topic and said, “He has just gone past Point-break, his cultivation level hasn’t stabilized yet, and he has encountered a xinmo. It was already extremely dangerous for him, but then he capriciously used a forbidden technique — in that battle on the Immortal-Locking Stage, could you tell how much he had forcefully heightened his own cultivation?”

Cheng Qian said, “I’m not any more skilled than he is, I can’t really tell. I can only generally estimate... it was at least one cultivation level.”

Tang Zhen said, “That’s right. It’s like a high-interest loan. Right now, he is unable to return what he had loaned. The distance between each step within the territory of sword gods is great, of course the backlash is perilous.”

Cheng Qian immediately understood Tang Zhen's meaning, "So as long as his real cultivation could catch up to what he had loaned, the pain from the backlash could be reduced? I can give him my own energy. At worst, I'll just cultivate for another hundred years. In any case, things like Heavenly Tribulations get easier each time."

Tang Zhen was stunned for a moment, then couldn't help laughing. "Do you think your energy is a bowl of rice, which you can freely give away? Let's not mention you not being a sword cultivator, even the energies of two sword cultivators might not be compatible."

When Tang Zhen spoke this far, he sighed. "If he wants to pass this hurdle, he'll have to enter the level of 'Sheathe' before his physical body collapses — but you must understand, matters of cultivation involve plenty of effort in order to deliver results. Even in the demonic path, which always takes shortcuts, there is nothing that will produce instantaneous results. He's a sword cultivator, who must exert great amounts of effort in each step, there is no outside object that can aid his cultivation. There is a great limit to the things that you and I can do as outsiders. Even if you have the intention, you don't have the power."

Cheng Qian's gaze instantly dimmed.

Under Shizhou Mountain, when the spiritual energy in his mind backlashes for the first time, Yan Zhengming really doesn't want to live anymore.

For a normal person, he can at least pass out when the bodily pains become too much. For Yan Zhengming, though he may pass out, his primordial spirit is wide awake and is stuck with the rioting sword energy in the inside of his head, which is nearly crushed. He can neither fight against it, nor can he run away. Inside him, not only his spiritual energy is in upheaval, there is also a deadly crack caused by the Dragon Binding Locks. That crack is mitigated only by the sword energy that causes trouble for both him and other people.

He has no other choice but to find joy in his suffering and proudly thinks, "I'm unexpectedly powerful."

However, just a second later, he has to bear a strike from his very powerful sword.

A sword cultivator's primordial spirit and sword energy can unite and become one because they have the same origin. The backlash happens

inside his own head, so he won't die even if he is stabbed into a sieve.

The more deadly problem is that inside his chaotic head, there is not only sword energy but also the fluttering black smoke, which is no other than that damned heart demon.

This thing can't be hurt by anything. From time to time, it'll emerge from some unexpected corner. If it manages to snare his primordial spirit, it will give him a brutal tongue lashing.

It starts with leading him into a pleasant illusion, in which the possibility to satisfy his deepest desire is displayed. As soon as he is tempted to take up the chance, the illusion immediately changes. It may take the shape of his Master, or Cheng Qian with an icy expression, or even Yan Zhengming himself, but the action and attitude are always the same, which is pointing at his face and shouting, "Shameless beast!"

He has to go through that mental burden while being pierced by his own sword at the same time, which is an unbearable torture for both his mind and his heart. This process keeps repeating without end.

What should Yan Zhengming feel, when he has to be painfully run through by his own sword energy under Cheng Qian's glare?

In the beginning, Yan Zhengming thinks to himself, "Why the hell should I keep on living? I should just destroy my own mind and get everything over with. In any case, I'm just a shameless beast."

However, he always remembers right away that with his cultivation, once he destroys his own mind, everyone within a good distance from him will be seriously hurt if they are not killed in the first place. Therefore, he has to endure.

He smiles painfully and says to the shade of Cheng Qian in front of him, "You... if someday you want to kill me, I guess I'll just lay down and die myself."

That reaction seems to be not what the effect the demon of the heart expected, so it cleverly transforms into Yan Zhengming himself.

Yan Zhengming immediately pales and hatefully turns away. "If it's you, forget it. Fuck off over there and drop dead."

Gradually, he gets used to the torture. The desire to live rebelliously rises in his heart, as he thinks. “If I really die, then what will happen to our sect? What will happen to my junior brothers? Do I want Xiao Qian to have to taste my century-long pains?”

As soon as this last thought emerges, Yan Zhengming can’t resist indulging in some fantasy. If he dies here right away like that, will Cheng Qian remember him for eternity out of grief? Although it is a really painful idea, as soon as he imagines that, in the future whether during cultivation or ascension, Cheng Qian will never get over him, Yan Zhengming feels so happy that he grins toothily.

Nevertheless, he doesn’t get to be happy for long, because the demon of the heart will periodically appear and reminds him that he is a shameless beast.

As more time passes, Yan Zhengming discovers that his primordial spirit can hear the sounds from the outside.

He knows that this isn’t a good sign. The weaker a primordial spirit is, the easier it gets assimilated by the body and accordingly receives part of what

the body senses. For him to hear sounds, that means his primordial spirit can't last for much longer. Nevertheless, when he first hears Cheng Qian's voice, he is so happy that he is nearly pierced by the sword energy from head to toe.

The problem is, for a long while, Cheng Qian doesn't say much, despite being always there.

The most talkative one is Puddle. Yan Zhengming discovers for the first time that his little sister has the bad habit of monologuing to anything. Every time she opens her mouth, she starts with "Most senior brother, I know you can't hear me, but," then yammers on for a good while.

From her, Yan Zhengming learns that he has been back to Fuyao Estate, and that Cheng Qian took him to the bamboo grove and has been looking after him without rest. Yan Zhengming even learns about the chaotic situation outside thanks to her habit of telling everything without discrimination. Compared to her, Li Yun is more boring, because he only sighs and occasionally complains a little.

Only when Tang Zhen comes over, that Yan Zhengming can hungrily listen to a few lines from the person he yearns for.

Thus, he gets to hear something very important.

Yan Zhengming completely ignores the part where Tang Zhen recommends preparing for his funeral. To him, it is just white noise. Only the line “no matter if it’s to the Heavens or the Underworld” stays with him.

With just this line, the constantly lurking demon of the heart withdraws, as if being scared off by his dumb smile. The black energy that has been covering everywhere suffers a mysterious damage and significantly fades.

“Do I have a chance?” He thinks to himself, as his soul does a somersault.

Unfortunately, the backlashing sword energy isn’t at all affected. His primordial spirit is stabbed and pinned on the spot. As his primordial spirit lies feebly in the disquieting head, Yan Zhengming sighs and thinks, “My feelings for him are worth it. Well, I can rest in peace.”

However, he himself doesn't notice that the damage caused by the Dragon Binding Lock to his mind slowly heals a little.

Outside the bamboo grove of Fuyao Estate, Puddle hugs an ancient sword in her lap. It is none other than Cheng Qian's Shuang Ren.

When Cheng Qian was tied up and taken to the Immortal Binding Platform, Shuang Ren was taken from him by Yang Decheng. During the chaos that broke out later, the sword fell into the possession of White Tiger Estate. When the White Tiger Estate sent a messenger to establish a friendly relationship, they also returned this killer sword that brought bad luck to whoever held it.

Switching from human form to bird form then back, Puddle makes countless rounds outside the bamboo grove. She is about to pluck out all of her own tail feathers out of anxiety, but she can't find a way to open the conversation. The day before, when Tang Zhen left the estate, he sent a message to Li Yun and told him to help Cheng Qian not to get too caught up in the situation.

It is likely that Li Yun has a bad feeling and dares not come himself, so he pushes all the responsibility on her.

If the worst really happens... Puddle jumps down from the top of the tree and stands there motionless for a while, as a great sorrow slowly spreads in her chest.

Her most senior brother is impossible to please, in addition to his habit of lashing out at her. However, she really can't imagine what it will be like, if he isn't there anymore. Just thinking vaguely about that is enough to make Puddle feel like the sky is about to collapse.

As she is standing without moving on that spot, the door to the building in the bamboo grove is suddenly opened from the inside. Before she can prepare herself, she already faces Cheng Qian, who is going outside.

"Third... Third Brother," Puddle stammers, "Second Brother told me to return Shuang Ren to you."

"Oh, I nearly forget it," Receiving Shuang Ren, Cheng Qian looks over her. His face softens. "It's only returning my sword. Why are you crying?"

Puddle wipes her face. It isn't until then that she realises her face is already wet with tears. All of the fears and hurt in her heart erupt and choke her, making her unable to say anything.

Cheng Qian looks up and sees Li Yun standing on the artificial mountain of the estate, who is looking on worriedly from afar. How can he not get what these two are thinking?

After a pause, Cheng Qian taps lightly on Puddle's head with his finger and says softly without hesitation. "Don't cry. I won't let anything happen to him. You can rest assured about that."

Puddle widens her eyes and stares at him through the tears.

Cheng Qian gives way to her and says, "Come in. I have to find Tang Zhen for something."

As he turns to leave, as if with divine intervention, something flashes in Puddle's simple mind. "Third Brother, please don't be reckless. You're already protecting our most senior brother by protecting yourself."

These extraordinary words pin Cheng Qian on the spot, as a strange feeling rises in his heart. It takes a while for him to quietly hums a reply without looking back.

Wherever there are human emotions, there are unrest and pain. The flavours of life are no other than that.

On the other side Tang Zhen listens carefully to Cheng Qian. He seems startled by what he hears. “What? There is no... Can you be mistaken? He, a sword cultivator who has reached the ‘divine realm’ level, doesn’t have his personal sword?”

No matter how many high-level spells carved on the blade of a sword, no matter how many precious artifacts used to forge that sword, no matter if there is the soul of a great warrior or a powerful demon sealed inside it, that sword is still a nonliving thing made from regular iron. It can be used to kill people, but can also be used as a knife to cut vegetables.

Only the blood of the many souls perished under a sword can give it a killer aura. Only the spiritual power and swordplay techniques of the sword’s wielder gives it its spirit. The sword’s mind arises from the primordial spirit

of the one who wields it. Time and time again, the wielder and the sword refine each other. That's the only way to create a sword that truly connects with its wielder.

It may not matter that much for the practitioners of the other paths, but the personal sword of a sword cultivator is of vital importance. Normally, the characteristics of the sword define the spiritual power and the affinity with the Five Elements of the wielder, among other things. Therefore, as soon as a sword cultivator reaches 'concentrate the mind' level, their first task is to find the sword Fate has assigned to them.

A sword cultivator without his personal sword is just like a beast without claws and fangs. What has Yan Zhengming been relying on to reach the 'divine realm' of sword cultivation?

After a while, Tang Zhen still can't recover from his surprise. "Then which sword he has been using?"

"A regular sword," Cheng Qian says, "He had a room full of swords when he was young. He hung them on the wall as decoration. If the sword he was using broke, he would just replace it with a new one."

When he newly reached ‘concentrate the mind’ level, Yan Zhengming had to lead everyone of his sect in their hasty escape from Azure Dragon Island. Then he wandered the world with Li Yun and Puddle. He had to make a living for his family while keeping up with his sword cultivation. On top of that, he had to deal with the sect leader seal. It can easily be seen how occupied he was. As he had no trustworthy senior nearby to instruct him, he completely ignored the sword issue.

“I stayed up the whole night to come up with a solution,” Cheng Qian says, “A sword is the only external factor I can come up with for a sword cultivator, which can connect with his mind. It just happens that my senior brother doesn’t have his own sword. Tang-xiong, if I can find that sword for him, will he be able to directly reach the ‘sheathing’ level?”

Tang Zhen hesitates a little before replying. “I really haven’t considered that. Your senior brother is indeed an unprecedented case. In this situation, if a suitable sword can be found for him, it may not help him progress to the next level, but it can still prevent further unrest in his mind. As long as he can wake up and use his spiritual energy to heal himself, both his injuries and heart demon can be gradually dealt with.”

Sweats suddenly seep out from Cheng Qian's palm. They stick on Shuang Ren's handle and form a thin layer of ice. He can't help but asks urgently, "Where can I find this sword? I have no clue for this, so I have no other choice but to consult you. If I can really... really..."

He is unable to continue. It takes a while for him to say slowly. "Tang-xiong, please help me with this. My life will be yours."

"No, no, no," Tang Zhen hastily waves his hand. "It's just common knowledge that anyone who lives long enough can tell you. Don't be so rash. We definitely have some clue for this case. Otherwise, sword cultivators wouldn't have time to do anything else besides searching for their swords. Normally, a sword cultivator doesn't enter the Tao based on nothing. They must be guided by a sword energy from somewhere around him. As far as I know, the personal sword of a sword cultivator is usually the one in their hand when they enter the Tao. Of course, there are exceptions."

Cheng Qian frowns. "He is that exception. When the disciples of my sect begin to learn swordplay, we all use bladeless sword made from wood."

Tang Zhen asks, "Then, the place where he entered the Tao is..."

Cheng Qian's eyes twitch a little as he says, "Fuyao Mountain. We can't return there."

Tang Zhen asks, "Who instructed him when he entered the Tao?"

Cheng Qian's face becomes even heavier. "My Master."

Tang Zhen knows it himself that Muchun Zhenren's soul was gone a long time ago.

Cheng Qian says, "Tang-xiong..."

"When a sword cultivator enters the Tao, what guides them is only one in these three factors: the weapon in their hand, a divine artifact, or the sword energy of a powerful cultivator nearby. He was using a wooden sword when he entered the Tao, so it's obviously not the first type. Therefore, his sword was guided by some divine artifact on Fuyao Mountain, or your esteemed Master himself."

At this point, even Tang Zhen looks visibly disappointed. The newly found chance and hope quickly turn impossible in a blink of the eye, as if Yan Zhengming's fate has been decided.

Tang Zhen pauses then shakes his head. "You... Alas, please bear with it."

Cheng Qian stands helplessly on the spot for a while. Then he picks up Shuang Ren and turns to leave. Tang Zhen hurriedly follows him. "Where are you going?"

"To the Valley of No Sorrow, where my Master's soul was gone," Cheng Qian says without looking back. "If that doesn't work, I'll go find Wen Ya, or go to White Tiger Estate, or the Azure Dragon Island, or even the Black Tortoise Hall. Anywhere that may have something of my Master's, I'll search there."

Tang Zhen says, "Won't you just run around like a headless chicken like that? Assuming that your Master left something, what if his sword has no relation to your Master and can only be found on Fuyao Mountain? Furthermore, even if you are lucky enough to find it, in his current state, his body won't last more than a hundred days. How can you be back in time?"

Cheng Qian turns sharply. For a second, Tang Zhen can't breathe, as a vague fear swells in his heart. He feels that Cheng Qian himself is a sword, not any different from Shuang Ren.

Standing against the light, Cheng Qian stresses every word. "I know, but... I refuse to cry before he is in the coffin."

Cheng Qian is the type that puts his money where his mouth is. He goes directly to Li Yun after leaving the guest quarters and drops a line. "I'm going out for something. Will definitely be back after one hundred days."

He disappears without bothering to wait for Li Yun's response.

Li Yun: "..."

It isn't until then that, for the first time, he understands his most senior brother's desire to call it quits and go home when they were on Azure Dragon Island back then.

Right at that moment, Puddle charges in, panting, "Second Brother!"

Li Yun unhappily says, “What’s the problem with you again?”

“Our most senior brother, this place on him...” Puddle points at her forehead. There is a long and thin dark red mark on Yan Zhengming’s forehead, which is the sign that he is under siege by the demon of the heart. Puddle incoherently says, as she uses her fingers to illustrate, “Suddenly became shorter!”

Does she think that the heart demon’s mark will become shorter just because she says so, as if it were an uncooked noodle? This girl’s mind is really strange.

Li Yun wants to tell her off, but Puddle already continues, “I thought my eyes deceived me, so I said ‘Most senior brother, why does your heart demon’s mark seem to shorten’. As soon as I said that, the mark indeed became shorter, as if he heard what I said!”

Cheng Qian isn’t aware of what has been going on in the estate. In the early morning of the next day, he already leaves and travels non-stop to the Valley of No Sorrow. The rollercoaster of emotions, as he finds hope then discovers that the hope is far from his reach, really tires him out, such that

even with his high cultivation and heart of steel, his legs can't help shaking when he rides his sword.

When he is in that old place again, he takes a deep breath to calm his disquiet heart, then strides into the valley. There seems to be some barrier ward in this valley, because Shuang Ren buzzes as soon as it is near the place. The blade shakes to the point that it gets out of control, and it absolutely refuses to stop, as if being extremely scared of something. Cheng Qian has no other choice but to land and go on his own feet.

He can't help but recall the first time he returned from there. Lord Gu sent a group of cultivators to look for him, but for some reason, those powerful warriors dared not set one step into the valley.

As Cheng Qian raises his head, the Valley of No Sorrow is like a giant jewel of nature. From afar, it emanates a layer of mysterious fog, which doesn't seem to be of the mortal world.

Maybe the body forged from the Spirit Collection Jade of his is too sensitive, but Cheng Qian keeps having the feeling that there is an unusual energy in this valley.

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Liu Yao - Chapter 75

The sun shines on the jewel and gives off a sheen, which can be seen but cannot be touched.¹

The entire Valley of No Sorrow emanates an unusual aura.

The previous time he entered the Valley of No Sorrow, Cheng Qian was only an ignorant child, who didn't even know how he ended up there. This time, he intentionally looks for the place, but as if blocked by ghosts, he keeps circling back to the starting point for an entire day.

That year, he was in a great shock because of his Master's death, so the part where he took Puddle to escape the Valley of No Sorrow left only a vague memory. He only remembers that though it was a hard trip, there wasn't much dangers besides the wild animals.

However, in the present, the world's most brutal sword Shuang Ren is staying close to him like a scared lamb.

Cheng Qian silently covers himself with spiritual energy and recites the Scripture of Serenity. He then signs a spell and lightly wipes his eyes, making a frosty light flash from them. Normal demonic tricks cannot deceive the eyes reinforced by primordial spirit. However, Cheng Qian frowns slightly as he observes his surroundings.

This valley is too quiet. Quiet to an abnormal degree.

The mountains are like jewels, and the greenery is beautiful. Yet such a large valley has neither infernal aura nor the spiritual energy of nature.

There is no sound, as if the scene were from a painting.

Without making a noise, Cheng Qian sits down where he is and tries his best to calm the slight wave of anxiety in his heart. He immediately recalls something that doesn't quite make sense. His Master said their disciple grandfather had 'fought that battle from Fuyao Mountain to the Valley of No Sorrow, which was two hundred miles away from there.'

Why was it the Valley of No Sorrow?

Was it really the case that Fuyao Mountain wasn't large enough for those warriors to fully use their power?

When he was young, Cheng Qian totally lacked common knowledge. He was completely ignorant of the cultivation world, and thought that one would only encounter ghosts when roaming outside at night. Later, when he formed a primordial spirit and encountered heavenly tribulations, he vaguely senses a force that is present everywhere, such that everything that exists in this world has a hidden side that fits some mysterious, predetermined pattern.

What is the hidden side of "Valley of No Sorrow"?

Was it really just a coincidence back then, when he stumbled into the Valley of No Sorrow?

As the sky darkens, the aura that is like a jewel's sheen of the valley becomes accordingly more melancholy. A fluttering sound can be heard in the wind, as if there were many people walking past him.

When the last sunlight disappears, Shuang Ren suddenly gives off a buzz without any warning.

Startled, Cheng Qian opens his eyes, but all he sees is a mortal child dressed in rags, who is standing in front of him without him being aware of it.

That child is skinny as a stick, like he has never had enough to eat. Only his head is especially large. He is at most seven or eight years old. One can see his missing teeth when he grins.

The child, who has been squatting in silence, grins to Cheng Qian as he opens his eyes and stares at him.

Cheng Qian was in seclusion in the ice lake of Mingming Valley for decades, so his body has a permanent frosty aura that keeps strangers away from him. If he doesn't hide his aura, not just mortals but even cultivators are scared of him.

However, the mortal brat in front of him doesn't seem to be afraid at all. On the contrary, he curiously pokes at the frost-covered Shuang Ren with his

dirty finger. It seems that he finds it too cold, because he withdraws his hand with a grimace and asks, “Mister Xiucan, why are you sitting down and sleeping here?”

After a pause, Cheng Qian replies, “I’m not a Xiucan.”

“Oh, then you are a Lord Juren?” The child widens his eyes. “My father says only scholars wear long robes like this. Farmers have to work in the fields, so they can’t wear these clothes.”

It’s hard to explain things properly to an ignorant provincial child, so Cheng Qian doesn’t say anything. He only smiles to the child.

The child grins, showing his missing teeth, and says, “I am Erlang. You wish to enter the valley? My home is right in there.”

Having said that, he points in the direction of the Valley of No Sorrow. Cheng Qian is quietly startled. Since when have people lived in the Valley of No Sorrow?

Looking at the child again, Cheng Qian senses that there is something really not right about him. As if seizing on a thought, he stands up and follow the skipping child into the valley.

It is strange that, as soon as his thought becomes clear, the winding path makes way for a clear road on which the two of them can easily travel inside.

Erlang doesn't walk properly. He constantly gets sidetracked by catching fireflies or picking flowers or throwing rocks into a ditch. From time to time, he grabs Cheng Qian's robe with his muddy hand and rambles on.

"My home wasn't here before. Then there was a great disaster. My father died. My mother didn't care about me anymore, so I moved here with my grandpa and many neighbours in my village."

A vague idea flashes in Cheng Qian's heart, so he asks, "What kind of disaster?"

"No idea," Erlang says, "I don't really understand it. My grandpa said it was a punishment from the immortals or something. The immortals are

really terrible. Lord Juren, where is your home? Are you a grand official?”

Cheng Qian hesitates, but the child doesn't wait for his reply. As they are talking, he grabs Cheng Qian's sword without any fear, then looks up and acts gravely like an adult, “In that case, you have to try and be a fair official!”

Cheng Qian's hand trembles slightly.

Because of his spiritual power, his body temporary is already significantly lower than normal. He is also holding Shuang Ren, which is extremely cold. Even so, he still feels frozen by this child.

Cheng Qian looks down. Erlang immediately gives him his toothless carefree smile. However, there are bright red marks around this boy's neck and the parts not covered by the sleeves.

It is said that only those who are frozen to death have this kind of red marks.

In a blink of an eye, Cheng Qian comes to a realisation. Only in a place of eternal rest that there can be no sorrow of the living world.

He stops in his tracks and asks in a low voice. “Are you feeling cold?”

Hearing that, Erlang grins and shakes his head. “On the contrary, I’m feeling hot!”

His face is completely carefree, but there seems to be some pale marks on it.

At that moment, an old man calls out in a low voice, “Erlang, come home right now!”

Hearing that, Erlang immediately lets go of Cheng Qian’s hand and replies energetically, “I’ll be right back!”

He skips a few steps around the spot, as he tells Cheng Qian, “My grandpa calls me back already. Lord Juren, you should find someone and ask for directions if you need to go somewhere.”

Then he bounces away as he hums a folk song of some unknown region.
The thing is, he has no shadow.

“Hey,” Cheng Qian suddenly calls after him. Erlang turns back and stares at him with his wide eyes that are free from the dust of the world.

Cheng Qian quietly stays where he is and leans on Shuang Ren, which has claimed countless souls. In the darkness of the night, he looks like the statue of a handsome deity. He says in a soft voice, “When I was a child, I was called Erlang too.”

In a blink of an eye, he seems to see the crossroads of the chaotic human fate, full of feelings and passions.

Since that time when his primordial spirit enters the Spirit Collection Jade, he has not been affected by the joys and sorrows of the human world so clearly like this.

Erlang gives him a surprised look, then scratching his unkempt head, he grins and runs off.

Cheng Qian quietly exhales. There is a yearning bubbling up in his heart. If this world has a place for the souls of the dead, then...

He turns into a shadow and gracefully passes by the villages of death like a breeze into the centre of the valley.

There is no sign of the tigers and wolves that were prowling the last time he was here. Cheng Qian instinctively understands that those wild animals that scared him into running back then were just a nightmare, as he was an unarmed child who had a heart full of blades.

This time, Cheng Qian doesn't get lost again. He quickly finds the place that has Tong Ru's remains.

It is a new moon night. The sky is clear like crystal with the light of countless stars. Those old bones don't seem scary at all, but give off an

indescribable peacefulness. Cheng Qian senses a vague resonance between Shuang Ren and the human remains in front of him.

At that moment, the scenery in front of him suddenly changes, as if the curtains hiding something had been lifted.

A quiet voice interrogates him, “In your life, what is the happiest moment? What is the most painful moment? Why do you insist on this path? Have you had any regrets in these recent years?”

This voice is very familiar, but Cheng Qian can’t recall where he has heard it before. Within seconds, he sees his weasel-like Master carried his child self to hide from the rain, all the while rambling about something. The child with a face full of soot in the half-collapsed shrine looked up in surprise, his hands holding a beggar’s chicken that had just been taken off the mud cover...

The long path suddenly changes to Fuyao Mountain. In the richly-decorated Land of Tenderness, the arrogant youth listlessly ordered his maid to give the two children a handful of pine nut candies each. With a face visibly full of disdain, as soon as he got out of the room, the little Cheng Qian, who

was only as tall as an adult's waist, gave without a care the candies to his junior brother, whom he found just as insufferable.

As if possessed, Cheng Qian steps forward and receives the packet of pine nut candies. He puts a candy in his mouth. The sharp sweetness wakes up his tongue, which hasn't tasted any flavour for a long time, and sends him into a light trance.

Unable to help himself, Cheng Qian gives way to the child on the stairs and slowly walks to the youth, who demands his hair to be brushed eight times a day. He watches that spoiled youth orders around his maids and servants, as something inside him breaks and drowns him in it.

Moving forward, Cheng Qian pulls the youth into his lap and holds him like holding the treasure of his life.

At that age, Cheng Qian's most senior brother hasn't fully grown yet. He is still slender the way teenagers are. He is a bit smaller than his peers, and is only as tall as Cheng Qian's lips.

Cheng Qian lifts his head a little and rests his chin on the head of the youth. In that moment, everything blurs in his eyes.

That is the happiest and at the same time most painful moment in his life.

As he holds the person he yearns for the most in his arms, he faces himself without hesitation, as he realises where his life will return to. At the same time, he understands clearly that everything is not real, that all hopes are as distant as a strand of sunlight when the sun sets.

Time flows, only death is certain.

At that moment, a sigh can be heard, and Cheng Qian's arms become empty. He looks up and sees that all the illusions disappeared. Muchun Zhenren has been standing in front of him for who knows how long. A bit further away is Lord Beiming: Tong Ru. His limbs are bound by pitch black chains, and his body is surrounded by a sphere of white light. Countless blades relentlessly spawn from that sphere and cut into him. However, he sits peacefully next to his skeleton, and doesn't seem to be in pain at all.

Cheng Qian asks, "Master? D- disciple grandfather, this is..."

Tong Ru nods to him from a distance and replies, “For my unforgivable crime, after my death, I have to undergo the punishment of being tormented by countless blades. I hope it doesn’t look too bloody?”

Cheng Qian: “...”

With a teasing smile, Muchun Zhenren signals for Cheng Qian to come nearer and comments, “You’re still wearing this stone face even as an adult. Not cute at all.”

Cheng Qian says softly, “Is my most senior brother’s habit of finding new ways to cause trouble everyday cute then?”

Muchun Zhenren smiles, “If he is so annoying, then why did you hold him so tightly without any desire to let go?”

Cheng Qian’s face darkens. He closes his eyes. After a long while, he says in a low voice, “Indeed, it was rude of me.”

The smile of Muchun Zhenren fades away. He wants to pat Cheng Qian's head as was his habit, but as he raises his hand, he realises that Cheng Qian has become a little taller than him. He can't reach his head as easily as before, so he hesitates in a moment of embarrassment.

Cheng Qian quietly puts Shuang Ren to a side and kneels down.

Muchun Zhenren asks, "How can you come here?"

"The Valley of No Sorrow is the realm of the dead from the human world," Tong Ru says casually from where he is, "Most of the wandering souls from all over the world will linger here for a while then fade. There are also those who are neither dead nor alive and have to wait here, until they completely rot away together with the grass and trees. On principle, living humans can't enter this place. Back then, as the two great evils that were myself and the Soul Consuming Lamp battled to the death with each other, the half-formed soul-tracing charm was activated. Those two were still children and thus not counted as full living humans, so they were sucked in. This time, this kid no longer has a flesh and blood body, so of course he can enter here freely."

Cheng Qian smiles ruefully, “My soul is still in this world, but my body is no longer here. I dare not claim things like ‘the heart is swayed by the body’ anymore.”

Muchun Zhenren gives him a piercing look and asks, “Kid, why are you here at the Valley of No Sorrow?”

Cheng Qian tells him everything from the beginning to the end.

“I see,” There is no expression on Muchun Zhenren’s face. A moment later, he says coldly, such that each of his word draws blood, “I thought you were here to visit my grave. As it turns out, you’re here to dig up the grave.”

Cheng Qian: “...”

To be fair, it is indeed like that.

Muchun Zhenren folds his arms and complains in a piteous voice. “Alas, keeping dogs is better than having disciples. They all grow up into ungrateful bastards.”

Next to him, Tong Ru says with a smile, “Indeed, the sword cultivators of us Fuyao Sect aren’t led by external artifacts. The guide into the path is just the wooden sword. The Master is just decoration, and of course there is no such nonsense as outside influence around. If you want to talk about a guide, then there is only the Fuyao Wooden Sword itself. What? Have you already forgotten what it was like when you were guided by the wooden sword into the first steps of cultivation?”

When a youth holds the wooden sword for the first time and immerses himself in that comical opening move, he will be led by the wooden sword to the realm of the sword will. Cheng Qian’s mind turns, as something dawns on him.

The chains on his arms give off a clang as Tong Ru says with a soft laugh, “Yes, it’s precisely that. You should go. Don’t return here anymore. It’s likely you won’t be able to meet us the next time you come here anyway.”

He is neither dead nor alive, as he waits here for the day he rots completely together with the grass and trees.

Cheng Qian can't resist asking, "Disciple grandfather, did you really enter the Three Lives Mystic Site?"

Muchun Zhenren's eyes spasm a little, showing that he is being reminded of a great trauma.

"Yeah, I was there," In a contrast, Tong Ru's face is unmoving. He looks like an old monk who has entered a meditative trance. "Then I consulted Xu Yingzhi. He cast the divination and gave me three rounds of Great Misfortune. On top of that, he told me to obey the Heavens' Will and meekly wait for death. I found that it was useless to have those kind of friends, so upon my return, I gave the sect leader seal to Xiao... your Master, then went to the Tower of No Regret."

"Tower of what?"

"Don't look back as you enter that place of no return. The Tower of No Regret where you give away your child without a tear.' Ah, it's also known as 'Tower of the Heart Demon'," Tong Ru says, "Fuyao Mountain is a natural mystic site. You must have heard of that already. Legend has it that a powerful cultivator who had ascended brought that mystic site into this

world from outside the Three Realms to guard the Tower of the Heart Demon. It also acts as a barrier between the human world and the world of the yao. Our Fuyao Sect is none other than the lineage of the guardians, who were entrusted to protect that gate.”

Cheng Qian is stunned to hear such a thing. “Is that true?”

“Likely not. It’s just a legend, the same as those stories of Hong Jun and Pan Gu creating the world,” Tong Ru looks at him with a good-humoured smile on the lips. At his moment, the Lord of all demons doesn’t seem scary at all. On the contrary, he seems pretty down to earth. “But the Tower of No Regret is real, and it carries an artifact that goes against the will of the Heavens.”

Cheng Qian blurts out, “The Wish-granting Stone?”

“After entering the Three Lives Mystic Site, my obsession was too much that I went into qi deviation. I risked everything to walk up the eighteen thousand steps of the Tower of No Regret, and retrieved the stone that had been sealed off by Fuyao Mountain for thousands of years. Then, ignoring the advice of the Four Sages, I pledged a million lives as a sacrifice to the stone, in return for an impossible wish.”

These final words give off a terrifying air. Recalling his Master's words "those who died under your hands" when he sealed the soul of Lord Beiming, Cheng Qian can't help feeling a chill in his heart.

"Frankly speaking, the souls you met in the valley are all outcomes of that seed," Tong Ru smiles ruefully. "My crime is unforgivable, but at least my wish was... honest."

Cheng Qian can't resist asking, "Who led you into the Three Lives Mystic Site back then?"

Without any resentment or hatred on his face, Tong Ru says simply, "One that meets their retribution."

Cheng Qian wants to press on, but Muchun Zhenren sighs and interrupts him. "Xiao-Qian, it's nearly morning."

Cheng Qian is startled, as there is already light in the East.

Muchun Zhenren looks at him and smiles. "I thought you could stay for a while longer, but it looks like that's not possible."

When he was young, his ignorance was a shield for him. In the present, Cheng Qian nearly cries as he hears these words. He chokes for a while, then says tearfully, "I want to stay here with you for eternity, but I promised him that I would return within a hundred days. I absolutely can't fail that."

Not far from there, Tong Ru smiles ruefully, as if he is amused, or is recalling something.

He suddenly raises his hand. The chains binding his body give off a loud clang and the energy of the blades torturing him surges, as he pushes Cheng Qian away.

The face of Muchun Zhenren gradually fades away, as miles of the dead's souls flash by under his feet.

For a moment, Cheng Qian loses consciousness.

1. From by Si Kong Tu (author's note)
2. Xiucai () and Juren (): Titles of scholars who passed the imperial examination and thus eligible to work as imperial officials. Xiucai is provincial level, Juren is national level.
3. From by Tao Yuanming

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Liu Yao - Chapter 76

When Cheng Qian arrives back at Fuyao Estate, he sees that no one in the estate is working, as they all gather and stare at something.

There is a crowd of people and carriages in front of the estate's gate. Two lines of silent soldiers stand parallel with each other by the gate like stone pillars. A carriage is parked near them. Although the two horses look nothing extraordinary to mortal eyes, Cheng Qian realises with just a glance that they are flying horses of decent quality.

In front of the flying horse carriage are two cultivators of fairly advanced levels. They have both formed their primordial spirits. One of them, who has the face of a youth, is shrouded in a special chilly aura.

That one is definitely a sword cultivator.

Countless people visit the estate in recent times. It's on Li Yun to deal with them. Cheng Qian doesn't care enough about them to stop. However, he raises Shuang Ren, as there is only one reason for him to slow down: a

group of people who dress all in black with their faces covered stand behind the carriage, which bears the flag of the Celestial Divination Bureau.

The older cultivator is asking to be let in. He talks very politely and presents very reasonable arguments, such as the state of the realm or civilians' lives. The person who is watching the gate of the estate must be Puddle, as the distinctive True Fire of a vermillion crane flashes over the nameplate made from stone of the estate.

Puddle is very good at using one method to deal with everything that comes at her. No matter which reason is brought up, she uses the exactly same reply: "Please leave."

If Cheng Qian didn't recognise her voice, he'd think that an automaton had been installed to play that response.

The older cultivator looks a bit helpless. The younger sword cultivator beside him hugs his sword to his chest and says without any reservation. "Senior Brother, why are you wasting your breath with them? These people have been hiding themselves from the world. I suspect their chief the sword cultivator isn't amount to much. It seems that the person who creates the

array surrounding this estate hasn't even formed their primordial spirit. Even if we force our way in, who can stop us?"

"Shut up," The older cultivator interrupts him. As he turns to admonish the other one, his gaze suddenly freezes, as he can't help but place his hand on his great sabre.

The young sword cultivator follows his gaze. Someone is standing on the top of the great tree not far from there.

That person's feet only touch the tree lightly. His sleeves billow in the wind like grey flags.

None of them notices his arrival.

This person is none other than Cheng Qian.

He looks down with an apathetic face that isn't quite of a living human. The young sword cultivator can't help feeling threatened. "Who are you?"

Before he even finishes his line, Cheng Qian suddenly aims his gaze at them.

Within seconds, Cheng Qian flies down from the tree and lands in front of the sword cultivator. A frosty energy quickly spreads, as killing intent emanates from his every move. All of the cultivators around instinctively fall back a good distance.

Not bothering to sparing them a glance, Cheng Qian says with a disdainful smile, “You still dare ask who I am while blocking the way into my home?”

Hearing that, the older cultivator quickly steps forward and salutes. “I am Wu Changtian, a humble official of the Celestial Divination Bureau. I come here to request a meeting with your esteemed sect’s leader. Daoyu, may I ask how I should address you?”

Cheng Qian has been prepared to flex his muscles against these people since a long time ago. He says immediately. “What the hell is a Celestial Divination Bureau? Piss off!”

He doesn't wait until he finishes talking to strike. Even if Wu Changtian has quickly moved to avoid it, he is still hit in the chest by a gust of frosty spiritual energy. Feeling like half of his body has frozen, he staggers back and crashes into the carriage.

Cheng Qian coldly sweeps his gaze across him. "Who is your Daoyu?"

"You!" The young sword cultivator angrily draws his sword and prepares to charge forward.

There is a loud clang from Shuang Ren in Cheng Qian's hand. "You want to fight? This Cheng Qian is ready to grant you that wish."

Hearing the casually tossed out name, Wu Changtian immediately knows who he is. He hastily shouts at his companion. "You Liang, step back."

Cheng Qian sweeps his mocking glance across the group dressed in black like a murder of crows in front of him. A cruel smile breaks out on his face as he speaks, "You are here because of Han Yuan the demonic dragon?"

Wu Changtian pushes an unwilling You Liang behind him, then smiles reconciliatorily. “Indeed, that villain is well on track to become the Lord of Demons. The demonic cultivators who have been in hiding all listen to his orders. If our side can’t cooperate, a great disaster will happen, so...”

Wu Changtian looks at Cheng Qian and sees his mocking gaze. He is unable to continue.

“Han Yuan the demonic dragon.” Cheng Qian quietly repeats then smiles, “Official Wu, do you know why he fell into the demonic path?”

Wu Changtian is unable to reply.

“The reason is, when he was a teenager, his mind was controlled by the ‘soul drawing’ spell of your senior at the Celestial Divination Bureau Zhou Hanzheng. Do you know what karmic retribution means?” Cheng Qian says in a very low voice, as if in dealing with these people, he doesn’t even want to spend his effort talking. “Sir Official, what did you just say? Your side?”

His voice suddenly turns frosty as Shuang Ren is drawn from its sheath with a flash. The sword energy strikes out like a tidal wave, which leaves a

long mark on the ground. The cultivators of Celestial Divination Bureau standing nearby are all hit by this attack. Both humans and carriage fall into a messy heap.

Cheng Qian's gaze is even colder than the sword's flare. "Take your dogs and scram! If you dare cross this line, pray that your next life will be better than this one."

At that moment, the gate of the estate opens from the inside with a loud creak. Assuming the manners of a well-bred young lady, Puddle walks out and delicately salutes the people outside. "Third Brother, our sect leader and senior brother says you should come in quickly and stop causing trouble. Gentlemen, our sect leader has been in seclusion recently. He can't receive guests. Please forgive us. Have a safe trip back."

It is obvious that Puddle isn't used to this kind of talk. She was a wild child that flew everywhere as she wished. It doesn't fit her at all, having to imitate the flowery manners of society. A thought flashes by Cheng Qian's head and makes him sigh.

Not only their sect's fortune has been downhill, they are always at the center of the storm.

Winking to make a signal to Puddle, he arrogantly turns his back to the group outside, seals off the gate of Fuyao Estate, and strides inside.

Puddle breathes out in relief. She runs after him and rambles. “Third brother, why are you back so fast? Have you found a way to help our most senior brother wake up? Listen, a few days ago, the mark of the heart demon on his forehead became shorter for some reason. What do you think? Is that a good sign?”

Cheng Qian simply nods and says, “Hmm, I have to be in seclusion for about one hundred days. It’s best to stop those people from disturbing us.”

“Okay, I’ll go tell Second Brother. He always has lots of ideas,” Puddle nods repeatedly. Then, as if remembering something, she says, “Oh, Third Brother, you don’t know this yet. It seems our most senior brother can hear us!”

Cheng Qian pauses his steps.

Puddle cheerfully continues, “What do you think? Will it help if I chat with him regularly? Hey, Third Brother, what’s wrong?”

Cheng Qian can’t help recalling how he and Tang Zhen talked without watching their words by Yan Zhengming’s bed. He suddenly feels awkward. Avoiding Puddle’s eyes, he covers his mouth with his hand and pretends to cough. “Nothing.”

At the same time, Cheng Qian turns things over in his mind. Their most senior brother has never been the academic type. Sitting through their Master’s lectures has caused him to feel sleepy just from seeing the written words. Besides their sect’s scriptures and cultivation methods, he never touches any book. He... won’t have some strange thoughts?

Under Puddle’s surprised gaze, the person who has just wrought terror with Shuang Ren suddenly becomes embarrassed and runs off like there was fire under his feet.

The next day, as if angered by the Celestial Divination Bureau’s non-stop harassment, the defensive array of Fuyao Estate completely changes. Something full of aggression has been added into the ‘eye’ of the defensive array, which causes the formerly calm array to emanate a cruel killing aura.

The intent is clear: no one in thousands of miles around is welcome inside.

All of the servants in the outer quarters of the estate have been sent away. Being hung high in the building, Shuang Ren is indeed the ‘eye’ of this defensive array.

Li Yun wipes his sweats, then salutes Tang Zhen next to him. “Tang-xiong, it’s all thanks to your guidance. You have our gratitude.”

“Daoyu, no need to be on ceremony. All I did was just rambling,” Tang Zhen glances at the bright blade of Shuang Ren and comments with emotions, “The Sword of Terrible Deaths. Perhaps only someone like your esteemed junior brother can control this killer weapon.”

Li Yun clasps his hands and vents, “It’s a great worry of mine that he is overly stubborn. Those who act too tough usually end up being brittle.”

Tang Zhen smiles, “Daoyu, you’re thinking too much. A cultivator has to struggle against the Heavens to shape their fate. Those who aren’t stubborn

usually can't get far. Wouldn't his temperament, one who refuses to give up until the very last moment, be better?"

The worry on Li Yun's face deepens as he speaks, "Cultivation is just a minor thing. What I fear is... In case things don't work out as we wish and something happens to our most senior brother. Would Xiao-Qian..."

Hearing that, Tang Zhen raises his eyebrow a little.

Would he what?

However, Li Yun swallows the rest of the line.

As if he just realises that he is talking to Tang Zhen, Li Yun hastily acts like he lost his concentration, and makes a salute. "Oh, I've been talking too much again. Tang-xiong, it's just trivial affairs of our sect. I won't bother you with that anymore."

Tang Zhen says, “It’s no problem. It’s just that, our young Cheng-Daoyu suddenly goes into seclusion without any explanation. I’ve no idea what he is planning. Daoyu, do you think he overestimates his strength and intends to make a sword himself? If he is unsuccessful, Sect Leader Yan won’t last much longer. In that case, Daoyu, what will you do?”

Seemingly without any calculation, Li Yun shows Tang Zhen the face of a truly helpless weakling. Fear written all over his expression, he smiles ruefully, “About that, I don’t know. To be honest, our sect leader and senior brother is like our spine. If the spine breaks, we will... Alas, we must look like a joke to you, Tang-xiong.”

Tang Zhen looks closely at him for a moment. His impression is that, among members of Fuyao Sect, Li Yun is indeed the weakest link if they really have to fight. However, this person’s mind is like a rat’s nest, full of turns and watching eyes. He is both suspicious and clever. They have talked for a good while, but neither side detects a single honest word from the other.

At that moment, Cheng Qian returns to the second Qing An Abode in the middle of the bamboo grove for his seclusion. He is holding in his hand a regular wooden sword of average size. The sword is very light, its wooden veins are gentle and pretty, without any aggression.

Cheng Qian stands by one end of Yan Zhengming's bed. Recalling Puddle's words that 'he can hear us', he feels that he should say something to him. However, as he goes through the many things he wants to say, he feels that most of them aren't appropriate.

Seeing that there is a strand of hair on Yan Zhengming's face, Cheng Qian instinctively raises his hand to brush it to the side. As he wonders if Yan Zhengming can feel it too, his hand pauses in the air. After a long while, he still dares not make the gesture.

In the end, he assumes a business-like tone, unaware that it sounds even more awkward than normal. "Senior brother, Puddle said you could hear us, so I'll keep it short. In the next few days, it's likely I'll have to send my awareness into your mind and sword energy reserve. It'll probably be uncomfortable. Please do your best not to hinder me. Give me space to work. It'll be cold, but staying alive is more important. Do you hear me?"

Having let it out all in one go, Cheng Qian feels like he has just accomplished an important mission. Placing the wooden sword on his knees, he calms himself and enters meditation.

Fuyao Estate has only a few regulars. Yan Zhengming can tell who comes just with the sound of the door opening and footsteps.

Since Cheng Qian finally returns after disappearing for a long while, Yan Zhengming is figuratively tearing his own hair out in his impatience to know where Cheng Qian went. Unfortunately, all he gets for his waiting in the inside of his mind is only a chilly order. Taking advantage of every opportunity, the demon of the heart gathers itself and takes up a variety of Cheng Qian's appearances, but it is all chased away by Yan Zhengming's primordial spirit.

The primordial spirit that was requested to 'stay out of the way when the time comes' mournfully thinks. "What kind of asshole junior brother is this?!"

At that moment, Yan Zhengming's sharp senses realise that his body is being surrounded by a very familiar sword will. He can realise what it is even with his eyes closed.

Fuyao Wooden Sword?

What on earth is Xiao-Qian planning again?

Cheng Qian can concentrate his mind very fast. He pushes aside all of the earlier distractions and lets his awareness sink into his own mind.

As if energised by something, the wooden sword on his knees slowly flies up in the air above Cheng Qian's head. A faint light emanates from the ordinary wood of the sword.

Cheng Qian's primordial spirit in his own mind holds a sword formed by his will. Imitating how Muchun Zhenren taught them swordplay back then, he very slowly goes through the first form "The roc travels ten thousand miles". Just like in the past, the sword will is gradually created in response to his sentiments.

Cheng Qian moves according to the first form time and time again, as he opens up his recollections to find his state of mind when he first learnt swordplay.

Having just joined the sect, he was accidentally carried off by Puddle, who didn't understand human speech, to the clouds over the mountains. From high above, he could see the countless relics on the mountains and hear the voice of his forefathers through the countless years. His heart unconsciously expanded, which fit the title of "Fuyao". Thus, he entered the Tao. Like a curious child dazzled by the fantastical, ever-changing scenery in front of him, he held the naive ambition of knowing more and more, beyond what he could understand.

After who knows how many days, the movements of Cheng Qian's primordial spirit through the form "The roc travels ten thousand miles" keep getting faster. Swayed by Cheng Qian's state of mind, his primordial spirit suddenly takes the appearance from his teenage years.

The sword will of this form has been created!

However, a "sword" has its spirit, and the sword will is invisible. These two elements have no vessel. How can they be bound to the wooden sword?

On his way back, Cheng Qian already carefully considered this issue. Living up to what other people expect of him, this asshole came up with an incredibly brutish method.

As his primordial spirit moves like an eagle along with the sword in his primordial spirit, the sword will of the form “The roc travels ten thousand miles” has been fully received by his spirit. In a blink of the eyes, an aggressive gust of spiritual energy rises inside Cheng Qian’s mind. It flies straight to his primordial spirit and slashes at both the primordial spirit and the sword.

The sword will that is still a part of Cheng Qian’s primordial spirit is cut off together with part of his primordial spirit. He pushes it into the wooden sword above him. One end of the wooden sword lights up as if given life.

However, how can it be a trivial thing to cut off one’s primordial spirit, no matter how small that part is?

Pain floods Cheng Qian’s mind and awareness. He recklessly swallows down a groan. A mouthful of blood rises to his throat but is pushed down.

Without any rest, Cheng Qian's primordial spirit once again creates a sword and begins the form "Seek and pursue".

Afterwards, it's "Not according to wish" then "Decline from the peak". Five years in which they bore all kinds of humiliation on Azure Dragon Island. The coin buried deep in the ground. The demonic dragon that met his eyes across the whole sky. Gu Yanxue whose body and soul both perished. Tong Ru who has been rotting alongside the forest...

He quickly goes through all eighty one parts. For the final 'Return to Trueness' form, Cheng Qian can't help but choose the 'Dried wood meets spring' move. The sword will from his mind flies through the spiritual energy base and enters the wooden sword, which is shining so brightly it dazzles the eyes.

Alongside the fresh spring flowers, all living beings wake up again from the deep snow of winter to start another year of growing.

Unfortunately, that flush of life is only a flash. Right away, Cheng Qian's suicidal action of cutting off his own primordial spirit without a care meets

its retribution. The wooden sword in the air suddenly loses its support and falls down, as he coughs out a mouthful of blood that chokes his throat. The blood splashes on the wooden sword.

The flowers and plants that were placed in an effort to create some elegance in the second Qingan Abode all wilt in a blink of an eye.

In the place where all lives terminate, the sword is formed.

Meanwhile, inside Yan Zhengming's mind, the heart demons that haunt him are all warded off by Cheng Qian's awkward instruction. All they can do is to float away from Yan Zhengming's primordial spirit. However, the raging sword energy in his mind won't calm down. It keeps gathering in one place, pulled by the invisible force of its owner's spirit, but just a moment later, its binding will break and the energy will disperse messily.

Only Yan Zhengming's primordial spirit sits unmoving in an upright posture inside of his mind, ignoring the many blades that pierce him time and time again.

The backlashing sword energy and the owner of the mind struggle in silence for a long time. The expression of Yan Zhengming's primordial spirit is completely calm, as if nothing in this world could shake him anymore.

Afterall, a sword cultivator is someone who uses their own being as a weapon. Wouldn't they have to be forged with countless pains and trials, even if that means they have to find a way back to life in the realm of death?

However, the struggle is disturbed by a bout of coughing. The person who coughs sounds like he would lose his breath. From that, it is clear that he is in trouble. In the past days, Cheng Qian doesn't make a sound. Had it not been for the faint sword will that lingers around, Yan Zhengming would think that he is no longer there.

Hearing a sudden sound from Cheng Qian, Yan Zhengming is shaken. His mind, which has been utterly serene for a long while, is disturbed by worry. As the calmness is broken, the seemingly subdued demon of the heart stirs up trouble again.

Yan Zhengming's primordial spirit springs up and forms a sword in hand. In the beginning, he only pushes aside the miasma of the heart demon. Eventually, he even recklessly confronts the increasingly chaotic sword energy. During the calm period, the backlashing sword energy is already aggressive. In this moment, it is like a boiling cauldron.

Yan Zhengming's mind undergoes a great tremor. The cracks caused by the Dragon Binding Locks are disturbed. However, he simply cannot suppress the intense desire of his heart, which is to get out of his inner mind to wake up and have a look at Cheng Qian at all cost. He knows too well what Cheng Qian is like. This one refuses to bend to any force. He doesn't know what slowing down and taking a detour is either. Whenever there is an

obstacle, he would definitely take the most drastic life-or-death measure.

At that moment, two chilly fingers touch his eyebrows, as if to open the way for a gust of frosty spiritual energy. Within seconds, the cracks caused by the Dragon Binding Locks are frozen over. Cheng Qian's voice, which is slightly hoarse, flies into his ears.

“Focus.”

Yan Zhengming grinds his teeth. “What have you been up to?”

Cheng Qian replies blandly. “Done with the sword. Got too excited and choked a bit.”

It doesn't sound like a recent excitement at all.

Right after that, as if to complain that Yan Zhengming talks too much, that icy awareness floods his mind without any warning. Cheng Qian, who has only one mode that is reckless brute force, isn't really good at healing other

people. Yan Zhengming fears he will get hurt, so he dares not obstruct the process. Additionally, he has to do his best to take on himself all of the backlashing sword energy. Thus, he learns for once in his life what ‘being ripped apart by countless blades’ truly is like.

Then, a sphere of gentle sword energy, which is a total contrast to the frosty aura from Cheng Qian’s awareness, cautiously enters Yan Zhengming’s inner mind. Within seconds, the sword will soundlessly separates from Cheng Qian’s awareness and spreads across the entirety of Yan Zhengming’s inner mind. The raging sword energy immediately ignores Yan Zhengming’s primordial spirit. It transforms into countless blades and charges at the intruder.

Yan Zhengming is startled, but Cheng Qian calmly says, “No problem. You should stand aside.”

As soon as he says it, a ray of sword will that is identical to the intruder appears in Yan Zhengming’s inner mind. It is very delicate but unpredictable and totally different from ordinary blades. In addition, its presence is everywhere.

That is none other than the primordial sword he saw when he entered the Tao!

No matter if it's a great fire or frost, nothing can eliminate the tiny grass and the gentle breeze that comes and goes in the prairie, as long as the first seed brought by the wind lands on the ground.

That wooden sword invokes every mindset conveyed by the Fuyao Wooden Sword. Yan Zhengming instinctively follows every movement of the wooden sword, which has no blade but contains everything. He freezes for the moment, as the reflections of centuries flash in front of his eyes.

In that blink of an eye, the primordial sword will meet the wooden sword. A strong light shines on the heavily injured primordial spirit of Yan Zhengming.

All of natural energy in Fuyao Estate floods into the new Qing An Abode in the middle of the bamboo grove like water from rivers gathering in the sea. The building and furniture shake, as the trembling yellow bamboo leaves are once more full of life.

Tang Zhen is the first to reach the bamboo grove, then come Puddle and Li Yun. Because Puddle runs too fast, she nearly crashes into the bamboo grove. Tang Zhen raises his arm to stop her. “Miss, be careful. We can’t get in there yet.”

Hearing that, Puddle is startled to realise that her strand of hair which flies in front of her has been sliced off.

The place that is full to the brim with the energy of life hides an overwhelming sword wind.

In Yan Zhengming’s inner mind, an ordinary wooden sword pierces through the sea of sword energy and directly enters the center of the inner mind like the divine Sea Calming Needle. A tornado rises and pulls into it the backlashing sword energy. Within seconds, the many blades formed from spiritual energy have been vanquished by the wooden sword and fall down.

In the blazing light of the sword, Yan Zhengming’s primordial spirit takes back control of his inner mind. All disturbances have died down, but he is still immersed in the overwhelming sword will.

All of the razor-like sword energy that spills outside is neatly gathered in his hand. The endless aggression in his heart suddenly transforms into calmness, as a thread of the will from Sea Tide Sword mixes in the Fuyao Wooden Sword.

He feels as if he were under the bottom of the sea, with bottomless abyss surrounding him and waves that reach the sky over his head. Raging storms are in his sleeves, but no sound is heard.

This is what 'enter the sheath' feels like.

From the outside, the formidable-looking prison turns out to be only effective for the brutes.

Of course Cheng Qian can sense that Yan Zhengming has advanced to the next level. He decisively withdraws his awareness and lets out a long sigh, in which exhaustion can be heard.

He has been sitting there for eighty one days. A layer of frost covers his features, showing that his internal energy has been pushed to the limit. It is pleasantly warm like spring weather in the new Qing An Abode, but the spot where he sits is frosty. There are bloodstains on his chest.

As his primordial spirit has been damaged, he will really need to spare some time to recover. However, Cheng Qian's heart is lightened, as if a great weight has been lifted. His mood is accordingly relaxed.

It is a price he willingly pays.

Cheng Qian turns to look at Yan Zhengming. The latter hasn't woken up yet, but the sickly aura around him has gone away. The cinnabar-coloured mark of the heart demon on his forehead has faded so much that one cannot easily see it anymore. All that is left is the pure sword flare that flashes once then makes way for total serenity. There is no sign of the earlier terrifying power from a sword cultivator that reaches 'enter the sheath' level.

It is hard to believe that Cheng Qian's wild idea of using the wooden sword as the base can become reality. Even if he has absolute confidence in himself, he can't help the faint smile on his lips.

A second later, the exhaustion due to the damage his primordial spirit suffered washes over him without any warning. Cheng Qian hastily supports himself with his arm and unceremoniously lies down. That tiny smile of pride turns woeful.

Li Yun's voice flies in from the outside, tinged with worry, "Xiao-Qian, how is it going in there?"

"No problem," Cheng Qian hastens to take a few deep breaths, and tries his best to steady his voice. He blandly replies as if nothing happened. "Wait a bit. I need to tidy myself."

As his voice sounds normal, Li Yun finally calms down. He even manages to crack a joke to other people around him.

He tells Puddle, "When those two emerge, I'll leave everything and go into seclusion. I have to worry about all kinds of trivial stuff all the time. With my low cultivation, I'm about to get wrinkles."

Tang Zhen keeps a distance from them. As there is still a faint trace of the unusual sword will in the bamboo grove, he catches a small bamboo leaf

and wipes away the morning dew on it. Several expressions pass by his face, which then settles on an indescribable note as he says, “To create wonder out of nothing, this is indeed a feat worthy of the person who faces heavenly tribulations without fear.”

Cheng Qian doesn't feel as comfortable as what he lets appear on his face. Because he can't make Li Yun and the others wait forever, he forces himself to stand up and quickly changes out of the tattered clothes. Then he signs a spell with some difficulty and destroys all evidence by turning those bloodstained clothes into dust, and cleverly burns some incense to make it look more natural. Having done all that, he finally wipes the cold sweats on his face and heals himself for a few seconds before opening the door to meet the others.

After perfunctorily answering everyone's questions and interrogations, Cheng Qian truly runs out of energy. He collapses onto the small divan nearby and falls into a death-like sleep before his head meets the pillow.

At that moment, because he is also a cultivator of the sword, You Liang, who is staying at a small town about thirty miles away from Fuyao Estate, feels keenly an indescribably powerful sword will that stays above Fuyao Estate.

As You Liang has just formed his primordial spirit, he can't yet recognise how powerful someone who has reached 'divine realm' level is. All he feels, keenly, is that he is shaking, from the desire to fight.

When it comes to sword cultivators, ninety nine out of one hundred are warlike. The more powerful and experienced their opponent is, the more eager they are to fight. Weapons in hand, they bet their lives against the most impossible odds, as improvement only comes from the most deadly situations. Naturally, there is always an exception. Yan Zhengming, who has managed the thousand-year rare feat of reaching the 'divine realm' level, is that odd one out. He wasn't born with a love for fighting. From the day he was guided into the Tao by the sword, all of his cultivation effort is simply to do what he has to do.

You Liang jumps on the roof of the inn and fixes his gaze on the aura of 'divine realm' power. The impatient desire to test himself fills his youthful eyes. However, there is a light cough behind his back. He reluctantly turns and sees Wu Changtian slowly approach him. He annoyedly says, "Senior brother."

Wu Changtian wordlessly looks in the direction of Fuyao Estate.

You Liang says, full of feelings, “I hope someday I’ll have the chance to battle against someone like that.”

Wu Changtian glances at him. After a beat, he sighs, “Xiao-Liang, after we are done with the demonic dragon, you should request to go into seclusion for three hundred years then leave the Celestial Divination Bureau.”

There are too many secrets held in the Celestial Divination Bureau. If a member wishes to leave, they must go into seclusion for three hundred years so that the secrets expire, before they are free to go.

You Liang is at a loss. “Senior Brother...”

Wu Changtian says in a low voice, “Besides you, Celestial Divination Bureau has no other sword cultivator. The path of the sword is very thorny. You need a firmer heart and desire to progress than practitioners of other paths. There are too many distractions in Celestial Divination Bureau. It isn’t a good place for you to cultivate. The Heavens granted you a rare gift. You must not waste it.”

You Liang frowns and argues, “It can’t be that serious. Look at Yan Zhengming. He is the sect leader of Fuyao Sect, but he still manages to enter the ‘divine realm’ despite all the daily affairs he has to deal with!”

“You only see his glory on the surface, but not the hardship underneath,” Wu Changtian shakes his head. His junior brother has been cultivating for barely a hundred years. His willingness to seek improvement in his path is firm, but he is still naive to the ways of the world. Wu Changtian turns and fixes his gaze at the endless darkness. As no sound can be heard around them, he says concisely, “For a ground snake to become a dragon, even if it’s via the demonic path, he still needs Heavens’ Will to succeed. For a realm to have two ‘true dragons’, what do you think that Will is?”

You Liang is terrified. “S-senior brother, you... you should watch your words.”

“There are many sects in this world, but when it comes to history, no one can match our Celestial Divination Bureau,” Wu Changtian smiles coldly, “Everyone thinks the ‘Celestial Divination Bureau’ was established by the Founder of the current Dynasty. They don’t know that the Celestial Divination sect had been passed down for hundreds of generations. We enter the Tao not for immortality but to prevent the powerful cultivators from doing harm to mortals. Even if the rulers of this realm change, our

purpose remains the same. However, the Founder of the current Dynasty used our name and pushed us to the frontlines, then recruited many rogue cultivators with unclear history. Back then, I already disagreed with that, but our sect leader stubbornly stuck with that plan. He said that an official position would be better for our work, and that we shouldn't think ourselves above mortals just because we had some cultivation. Then he put his trust in the likes of Zhou Hanzheng, who had neither ethics nor morals. Hah, now we end up as goons for the Emperor!"

You Liang confusedly asks, "Senior Brother, if changes of dynasty aren't your business, then why do we have to do everything to stop that demonic dragon?"

"Have you thrown everything you learned to the dogs? Don't you know that 'Strong wind can't last a whole morning, heavy rain can't pour a whole day'?" Wu Changtian sighs, "Throughout history, have you ever seen a demonic cult that lasts a long time? They are of course powerful, but their fall comes as fast as their rise. In any case, those demonic cultivators obviously don't care about the collateral damage of what they do. They don't necessarily want the realm, they just want to cause trouble. Of course we can't let them get away with that."

The sword will above Fuyao Estate gradually fades. It must be gradually withdrawn by that extraordinary sword cultivator. Something stirs in Wu Changtian's eyes. It is awhile before he speaks again in a low voice, "Back then, the slayer of demons fell into the demonic path. In the present, the defenders of the Way have lost their way. Celestial Divination sect and Fuyao Sect, both sides have fallen. It is indeed... Well, I think their sect leader will come out of seclusion in just a few days. Let's pay them another visit then."

Yan Zhengming has to meditate in the realm of 'enter the sheath' for one day and one night, in order for him to calm the backlashing sword energy. The injuries caused by the Dragon Binding Locks in his inner mind become negligible. As his energy base is free again, he recovers in just a short while. He examines himself and sees that even the heart demon has been significantly subdued.

The problem is, once it has emerged, the demon of the heart is hard to get rid of. The more he pays attention to it, the more it haunts his heart. Perhaps it's better to just go with the flow.

Yan Zhengming finally opens his eyes. Rubbing his forehead, he feels that as he advances to the next level, he can take things more easily. He thinks

that with his personal qualities, he may not become the most powerful sword cultivator in history, but it isn't bad to be the most easy-going one.

There is still the matter of the sword Cheng Qian brought into his inner mind. Although their swordplay all has the same origin that is the Fuyao Wooden Sword, they understand it differently because of their different personalities. Even the same person may have different perspectives on it when their circumstances change.

In Cheng Qian's case, although he entered the cultivation path with Fuyao Wooden Sword, he has come to lean more on Sea Tide Sword. The two styles are completely different, each has its own unique philosophy and strengths. However, the more advanced they are, the more they find that the two styles can complement each other very well. When Yan Zhengming sheathed his sword, he worked along with the sword will of the great sea tide. Had it not been for it, he couldn't withdraw the sword energy so quickly.

There is also...

Perhaps it's Yan Zhengming's delusion, but he keeps having the feeling that there is a part of Cheng Qian inside the wooden sword. Although the sword

will is purely of Fuyao Wooden Sword, it is surrounded by an indescribable frost-like aura. It is not a part of the surrounding sword energy, but at the same time, it is not a hostile alien. The wooden sword stands upright in Yan Zhengming's inner mind like a faithful guard. It doesn't go anywhere, but doesn't integrate with the surrounding either.

Yan Zhengming takes a deep breath and detects a trace of pleasant mind-calming incense. The incense has been burnt through without being replaced. As the windows of the room are wide open, the scent that remains in the room is very faint. He stretches himself and stands up with the intention to burn more incense. It isn't until then that he sees Cheng Qian sleeping on the nearby divan.

Yan Zhengming: "..."

As if scared, he immediately withdraws the leg he has just stretched out. He stands there for a while before cautiously tiptoeing in that direction like a burglar, where he finds out that Cheng Qian is sleeping.

It must have been tough to forge that Fuyao wooden sword. Otherwise, Yan Zhengming can't imagine what can make someone with Cheng Qian's cultivation so exhausted to the point of sleeping so deeply.

Cheng Qian's body was forged from the Spirit Collection Jade. When he sleeps, he doesn't make any sound, as if he were just furniture in the room. At first, Yan Zhengming tiptoes near him. After a couple of steps, he straightens his back, feeling that this kind of shady behaviour like a rat stealing food isn't something appropriate for a sect leader like him.

Yan Zhengming intentionally causes a few small noises, as he walks directly in front of Cheng Qian. However, Cheng Qian doesn't even stir.

Yan Zhengming bends down and looks closely at Cheng Qian's sleeping face. As the distance between them shortens, the overwhelming desire to kiss Cheng Qian's forehead suddenly rises in his heart.

In the end, he manages to control himself and steps back.

Yan Zhengming feels that he can't do the deed, because there is an indescribable innocence on the sleeping Cheng Qian's face.

Yan Zhengming smiles ruefully and lightly touches Cheng Qian's head.
“‘No matter if it's to the Heavens or the Underworld’. How could you say that so carelessly? Do you even understand what that means? Watch your words a little, don't you?”

Perhaps in all Three Realms, only someone so extraordinarily unobservant like Sect Leader Yan can find Cheng Qian ‘innocent’.

Liu Yao - Chapter 78

Cheng Qian is someone who is unwilling to pause and relax even for a second. He hasn't had such a long sleep for who knows how many years, in which he even has a storied dream. In that dream, he isn't a powerful cultivator who can control the elements and face lightning from the Heavens, but only a poor scholar from a humble origin. He is so poor that he is unwilling to throw away damp writing paper but dry it under the sunlight. He also licks the bone-dry brush to make use of the remaining ink, which tastes slightly bitter. There is so little work for him to do that he feels desperate.

Ah yes, he also has a wife dressed in rough homemade clothes, who complains non-stop that he lives too messily or doesn't bother to change his clothes. That spouse of his leans on the threshold. Picking up his cup of tea, that person scolds, "You're so poor that you save the dredge of your tea."

Cheng Qian replies without bothering to look up. "Won't that make me a good match for the shrill woman who is leaning on that threshold?"

"Shrill woman?" That person chuckles. "Why don't you have another look and see who I am?"

Cheng Qian confusedly looks up. The sight that slams into his eyes is an arrogant young master dressed in white. That person looks at him with a vague smile. His peach-blossom eyes are full of an indescribable allure.

Cheng Qian's heart quickens. He wakes up in a second, but still feels like he is in a dream.

He stares in a daze for a long while. What he sees is the bright moonlight outside the window and the distant stars. There is a cool aura like autumn dew in the room. His body is covered by a thin blanket. For a moment, he has the illusion that he returned to that mortal life again.

Yan Zhengming is sitting by the door with his back to Cheng Qian. Using a bamboo leaf as a flute, he plays a severely out-of-tune melody, which disturbs the peace around him.

Cheng Qian is rudely roused from his dream-like reverie by his senior brother's unique leaf flute performance. As the desire to throw the incense burner at Yan Zhengming's head completely washes away all feeling of attraction in the dream, he can't help coughing pointedly and saying, "Why don't you go back to your room and play there?"

Yan Zhengming's maddening leaf flute melody completely extinguishes. Without turning back, he says in a calm tone, "I've been playing here for three days already. The insects in the grove have likely all taken their families and run away. Only you don't see or hear anything."

Then he turns over. His face is utterly blank like a still lake, his eyes are like deep wells filled with the darkness of the night, his voice is like a banked flame, as he says, "Forget cultivators who have formed their primordial spirits, even mortals don't sleep like death as you did. What is actually in that wooden sword?"

Cheng Qian replies without blinking, "There is sword will in it."

Yan Zhengming's eyes twitch. "Stop talking nonsense. You think I can't find out by myself? There is obviously a spiritual awareness in that wooden sword!"

Cheng Qian's mind has been still lagging after waking up. Hearing that, he is completely wide awake out of fear.

The sword will in the wooden sword is none other than a part of his primordial spirit. He can't be found out so soon? However, he has been unconscious in the past days. There is no way that spiritual awareness is stirred up. Can his senior brother be so sharp?

He stares fixedly at Yan Zhengming for a moment, wondering if he is being duped. He calmly wrinkles his eyebrows and says, "Of course there is a spiritual awareness in the wooden sword. The sword will of Fuyao Wooden Sword is like a living being in itself."

Cheng Qian's guess is on the money. Yan Zhengming is really just trying to trick him.

Yan Zhengming quickly realises from this line of Cheng Qian's that he won't be able to dig up anything else. He angrily turns around, presses Cheng Qian's shoulder, and lifts his chin up. Cheng Qian's lips are blanched. He still looks tired even with a three-day sleep. It is obvious that he is suffering from some internal injury.

Yan Zhengming smiles coldly. "Even if you refuse to say anything, can I not investigate by myself?"

As soon as those words are spoken, Cheng Qian feels a gust of spiritual energy enter his meridians from the major acupoint Jian Jing¹. Because his primordial spirit is damaged, all of his spiritual energy has been gathering in his inner mind to fix the injury. He is caught off guard, so he is completely unable to stop the intruding energy.

As that spiritual energy ray charges into his body, Cheng Qian cleverly groans quietly, then bends his body, as if he is in great pain. He has never been so smart in his whole life.

Someone like Cheng Qian wouldn't bat an eye even if the world were falling apart. Ever since his childhood, he has been a stubborn asshole, who would swallow his blood in when his teeth are broken in a fight. As he very rarely shows that he is in pain, the act is especially effective. Even if his performance is quite stiff and lacking in many aspects, it is more than enough for Yan Zhengming, who has a talent for imagining the worst.

Sect Leader Yan immediately forgets that he is conducting an interrogation. His face pale from fear, he immediately extinguishes the energy ray and gathers Cheng Qian into his arms, then stammers, "What's wrong? Did I overdo it? Uh... I..."

Thus, Cheng Qian discovers a new trick to deal with his senior brother, which is effective far beyond his expectation. Though feigning great suffering cannot be used regularly, it can be very useful in key moments for scaring the other side. Accordingly, he resolutely frowns and shakes his head without uttering a word.

Yan Zhengming springs up. "Let me get you some water."

Cheng Qian takes a peek. Picking the right timing, he makes his voice stuck in his throat and says timidly, "What actually happened was, I went to the Valley of No Sorrow and met a piece of our Master's soul there."

Yan Zhengming is at a loss.

"It was our Master who suggested the method of using the wooden sword as the container for the sword will," Cheng Qian goes with the flow and says without any shame. Their Master is dead anyway. There is no witness to counter his words. "It wasn't my own idea."

Yan Zhengming is nearly drowned in his guilt, such that he dares not even look at Cheng Qian's face. At that moment, even if Cheng Qian claimed

that the moon was square, his heart would make him believe it.

The dignity of Sect Leader Yan is about to go with the dust that is regularly cleaned out from the second Qing An Abode.

Cheng Qian lets out a sigh in relief, as his most senior brother is scared off with just a couple of his lines. He feels that he has used up all of the wit accumulated from his birth for that one instance.

Yan Zhengming diligently uses white silk to clean the tea cups on the table and prepares to pour the water. Watching his profile, Cheng Qian is suddenly startled.

Can there be... a link between the piece of primordial spirit that was cut off and his awareness?

As soon as this thought appears, his awareness suddenly connects to a strange piece of mind. Cheng Qian's vision blurs, as he feels like he is divided into two. A half of him stays unmoving on the divan, the other seems to be in the wooden sword. Through the serene sword wind, he can see a trace of faint black energy not far away.

At that moment, the cup in Yan Zhengming's hand falls onto the ground with a clang. Cultivators have very sharp senses, that they can feel someone's gaze on them. Needless to say, he can feel someone is snooping in his inner mind. He only doesn't know the cause of that.

Cheng Qian quickly realises that he has been too sloppy. He hastily cuts off the strange connection, while donning a calm face, as if nothing happened.

Yan Zhengming frowns and clears away the shards on the ground with a flick of his hand. On full alert, he investigates his surroundings, but doesn't find anything. He ends up thinking that it was just a hallucination from too much tension.

He pours another cup for Cheng Qian and places it by the divan. After a moment of thinking, he can't help running his mouth off again. "Don't make other people worried like that."

Cheng Qian watches him, and quietly contemplates the timing for investigating the heart demon that he refuses to talk about. As Yan Zhengming meets Cheng Qian's eyes, his throat suddenly becomes dry, as his heart becomes a mess in just a second.

He hastily coughs and says in an attempt to cover it up, “You never give me a moment of quiet. In the worst case scenario, what would I explain to our Master in the Underworld?”

Cheng Qian thinks to himself, “I? Needing you to speak for me?”

Annoyance rises in his heart, but before he shows it, he hears Yan Zhengming sighing softly. As a result, he quietly swallows back the words that are on the tip of his tongue.

Yan Zhengming places a hand behind his back and runs his thumb over his fingertips. However, the awkwardness keeps lingering on. He feels that he shouldn't be so distant to Cheng Qian, but there is no way he can get closer or touch Cheng Qian a little without his conscience protesting. In the end, he makes a dry cough and says, “Heal yourself. I'll watch over you.”

Having said that, he sits down by the door again. With his mind being somewhere else, he picks the leaf he threw on the ground, and forgetting how dirty it is, he places that leaf on his lips. Nevertheless, even if he forgets his own cleanliness habits, Cheng Qian remembers very well his ‘heavenly’ music. Feeling that he would lose his mind if he must hear that

sound anymore, Cheng Qian hastily speaks up, “Don’t play in front of my place!”

Yan Zhengming: “...”

A black insect slowly crawls on the leaf.

At that moment, there is the sound of footsteps from nearby. Yan Zhengming is startled. As he looks up, he sees Tang Zhen, who is approaching with a small ceramic jar in his hand.

“Tang-xiong,” Yan Zhengming throws the leaf away and stands up.

“Has my young friend woken up?” Tang Zhen says as he hands over the ceramic jar. “This body can’t last much longer, so I have to part with you tomorrow. Thank you very much for your hospitality. These pills are very good for internal injuries. Please give them to him.”

Yan Zhengming hastens to express his gratitude. Without any word, Tang Zhen glances at Cheng Qian from a distance. After a neutral nod, he turns and leaves.

Liu Lang waits for him with a lantern in hand just outside the bamboo grove. Tang Zhen takes the lantern and says with a sigh, “Besides extraordinary cultivators of both righteous and demonic paths, Fuyao Sect sure breeds a lot of romantics.”

Liu Lang’s response is just silence. Tang Zhen laughs softly. Putting a hand behind his back, he says, “But that’s understandable. The cultivation life is boring. What else is there for them to do besides having some feelings?”

He coughs a little during that speech. Liu Lang reminds him, “Senior Tang, the aura of death on your face is getting worse.”

“Oh,” Tang Zhen wipes the corner of his mouth. “People like you and me don’t need to get involved so deeply with anyone. It isn’t bad just to ensure our own survival first. I heard that young Nian Daoyu wishes to stay and request Sect Leader Yan for him to join Fuyao Sect. Don’t you too want that too? I keep having to go into seclusion during my travels, so it’s likely I don’t have enough energy to guide you in cultivation.”

There is no skin left on Liu Lang's face, so no expression can be shown there. He replies calmly, "Senior Tang, I'll follow you."

Tang Zhen doesn't waste anymore time talking. He simply waves his hand, as if it makes no difference to him whether Liu Lang follows him or not. He is like a moth that goes with the flow of an unknown fate. During their talk, the two of them quickly leave Fuyao Estate and disappear like two shades.

In the early morning of the next day, Yan Zhengming, who is covered in dew, opens his eyes as if sensing something. He turns and looks at Cheng Qian. After confirming for himself that Cheng Qian is alright, he waves his hand to the bamboo grove and calls in their Second Brother, who is wearing a serious face, "What's wrong?"

Li Yun replies, "The Celestial Divination Bureau people came again. When they came the last time when you were still unconscious, I already turned them away. Looks like they've been hanging around here, and show up again now because they saw you left your seclusion after making the next step in cultivation."

“Celestial Divination Bureau?” Yan Zhengming frowns and declares without thinking, “Just do what Xiao-Qian said and kick them out.”

Li Yun teases, “What if Xiao-Qian told you to marry them?”

Yan Zhenming: “...”

Li Yun sighs, “My Sect Leader, I didn’t know you had the tendency of a ruler misled by...”

Before Li Yun can say “love”, Yan Zhengming quickly mutters a spell and shuts his crow’s mouth.

Being blocked from speaking, Li Yun indignantly stares. He feels that his senior brother is like an evil stepmother and makes his life harder than that of a neglected orphan, that he is no better than an old wooden spoon that people leave rotting on the ground without a care.

Li Yun thinks, full of righteous anger, “I should take Puddle and leave. We can wander the whole world as beggars!”

Hearing the conversation, Cheng Qian immediately opens his eyes. “Most senior brother, the last time they came here, you were still in danger and I was about to enter seclusion to forge the sword, so I chased them away without any explanation. If they make an effort to wait all this time, I think we should meet them once. Huh, what’s wrong with Second Brother?”

Yan Zhengming quickly releases Li Yun from the spell. Li Yun coughs until his face becomes red. As if finding his strength again, he yells at Yan Zhangming, “Did you hear that? Did you hear that?!”

Yan Zhengming says, “Just hearing ‘Celestial Divination Bureau’ annoys me. Why should I meet them?”

Cheng Qian hesitates a little, then tells a simplified version of how he met Tong Ru and Muchun Zhenren in the Valley of No Sorrow. At the end, he says, “Our disciple grandfather said the one who had tricked him to enter the Three Lives mystic site had ‘met their retribution’. Though he didn’t say it out loud, I feel he implied the Celestial Divination Bureau. What has been going on inside there must be much more complicated than what first appeared.”

Having heard the full story, Li Yun can't help frowning. "A million lives. Did your disciple father say that?"

Cheng Qian asks, "What's wrong?"

"You've been in seclusion a lot, so maybe you don't know about what has been happening outside," Li Yun says, "But from what I know, in the last two hundred years, there has been no significant disaster, whether natural or manmade. Even the rebellion of Prince An a few years ago was much noise but little substance. It didn't cause that many deaths. How are we supposed to explain this loss of a million lives? Can't it be..."

Cheng Qian's eyes darken. "The remaining soul of our disciple father is still imprisoned. The seal over Fuyao Mountain hasn't been opened. If what our disciple father wished from that stone is 'the restoration of his sect', that wish hasn't been fulfilled yet. In other words, the price of a million lives hasn't been paid. Will Han..."

Before he can finish his thought, the clear sky suddenly darkens, as black clouds from all sides gather. The rumble of thunder can be felt.

Yan Zhengming raises a finger and tells Cheng Qian, “Spare your words. You must not attempt to uncover Heaven’s Will.”

Cheng Qian’s eyes darken. That means he is on the mark.

After a moment of silence, Yan Zhengming stands up, “Let’s go meet them.”

“Most senior brother,” Li Yun suddenly calls out to him, “If... Han Yuan really...”

A bolt of lightning strikes, the flare of which shows how pale Li Yun’s face is.

Li Yun says, “What will you do?”

Will you protect him despite all of the terrible wrongdoings? Or will you ignore all brotherly sentiments from our childhood and execute him according to the sect rules, which are so ancient that they seem to have a spirit of themselves?

Yan Zhengming pauses. He stands in silence for a long while, as the wind suddenly blows and makes his sleeves flutter. When he shows off or acts like a nuisance, he doesn't look like a sect leader at all. However, in this moment, tied up in a dilemma, his face is grave just like his ancestors on Fuyao Mountain in ancient times.

Yan Zhengming doesn't reply. He just shakes his head and turns to enter the falling rain.

As a gesture of good will, Wu Chengtian leaves all of his subordinates outside the estate. Taking only You Liang with him, he assumes a humble attitude. Puddle pours them tea, then after the line of 'Please wait a moment', she silently moves to one side and stands there like a statue.

Although she says nothing, Wu Changtian quietly makes his judgment about her. Of course Wu Changtian can recognise that she isn't fully human. Even if her cultivation is still limited, with his experience, he can still tell that there is a formidable power inside her, which is being carefully locked down.

Wu Changtian can't help looking at his neatly cut fingernails. He thinks about how Fuyao Sect's lineage was once cut off and disappeared for more than a century, but their successors hold immense potential. Even if the sect is besieged with dangers, they will definitely live on. In contrast, the Celestial Divination sect looks powerful from the outside, but their inside is so rotten that the inheritance is unclear.

In the end, which side should be pitied?

At that moment, the sound of footsteps, which is intentionally made heavy and slow, can be heard. Squeezing his sword, You Liang raises his head and looks directly at the sword cultivator who has reached the 'divine realm' in front of him.

Yan Zhengming only apathetically glances past him without pausing in his steps. He slowly walks to the seat for the lord of the household, then not offering any greeting, he directs his attention to adjusting his pristine sleeves. After that, he wordlessly looks at Puddle. Following the script, she primly pours the tea and puts the cup on the small plate, which was carved with spells, on the table. With a soft sound, the cup of tea immediately cools down as it touches the spells, and a thin layer of vapour covers the cup.

It isn't until then that Yan Zhengming takes a sip of tea. Then tapping the wooden table with the fan in his hand, he says coolly, "The Divination Celestial Bureau has never been our friends. For you two gentlemen to go all the way here, it isn't unlike a fox that calls on a coop of chickens. Please go ahead, tell us what you are plotting."

1. Jian Jing acupoint: the acupoint on the shoulder.

You Liang is paralised with anxiety. All his life, he has never seen a sword cultivator with this kind of personality. Yet this person has the highest cultivation level of anyone he has met. You Liang can't help but doubt his entire upbringing from childhood. Can it be that the teaching for sword cultivators to 'discipline and control oneself' is all wrong?

In a blink of an eye, he feels that the sword in his hand isn't worth much anymore.

Yan Zhengming doesn't bother with courtesy as he speaks. Fortunately, Wu Changtian's patience is well-honed, so he doesn't rise up to the provocation.

Wu Changtian quietly takes out two small and ancient-looking seals made of stone from his robe. One of the seals is all white without stain, as if carved from jade. The other one is all black, on which a sigil in the shape of a tortoise is carved. One can tell without checking the name where this seal

comes from: the Black Tortoise Hall of the primordial glaciers in the far north.

Yan Zhengming raises his eyebrow. Not bothering to reach out to receive the seals, he says, “What are those?”

“The two lords of White Tiger Estate and Black Tortoise Hall asked me to deliver these to you, Sect Leader Yan,” Wu Changtian says, “According to them, you’ll know what they are for yourselves once you see them.”

Obviously, these two seals are none other than the passwords for the ‘Earth’ lock. Yan Zhengming can tell it without even looking.

He puts the cup of tea to one side, then gives a chilly smile as he says, “Is this your way to bribe me? To be blunt, these seals were entrusted by my

sect to the Four Sages. It's natural that they return to us. Who dares to deny me when I claim them?"

Sect Leader Yan's gaze shows that he may not know how to talk to people, but he definitely can insult them. As his eyes sweep across the scene, it can be understood clearly what he means: 'who asks you busybodies to interfere in other people's business?'

In the present, even if the Four Sages have been on the decline, who would dare to look down on them like that?

This person dares to kill an Elder right in front of Bian Xu's eyes. Wu Changtian smiles ruefully, as he thinks that dealing with someone like that is even more troublesome than dealing with those old foxes.

"You..." You Liang is on the way to losing his temper, but Wu Changtian pushes him back down.

“I dare not accept such praise from you, Sect Leader Yan,” Wu Changtian says nearly timidly, “I just deliver these because I happen to be on the way here. It’s not something worth mentioning. To someone like you, wouldn’t it be an insult to talk about ‘favour’ or ‘benefits’, Sect Leader Yan?”

With an arrogant air, Yan Zhengming doesn’t reply. In this respect, Official Wu is truly clumsy. Sect Leader Yan has been the “Money Hunting Young Master” for so many years, that there is not much left of his ‘dignity’. He really welcomes other people to bring him this kind of insult.

Yan Zhengming picks up the Black Tortoise seal and examines it. Seeing the words ‘Seal of Bian Xu’ carved on one of its side, he says in a bland tone, “Fine, what’s your name?”

You Liang’s face becomes white. In contrast, Wu Changtian is in complete control of himself. He replies, “My family name is Wu, the first part of my

name is Chang, the second is Tian.”

“Ah, so you’re Wu Daoyu,” Yan Zhengming glances from the corner of his eyes. He suddenly says, “Oh, there is something that has been bothering me all these years. Wu Daoyu, do you mind explaining it to me? In your opinion, why did Zhou Hanzheng make the effort to plot the murder of someone who only laboured for the benefits of other people like Gu Yanxue?”

On the surface, the battle on Azure Dragon Island looked like a collaboration of Bai Ji and Tang Yu to drive Gu Yanxue in a corner. Zhou Hanzheng and his black-clad goons only fanned the flame. However, when one thinks about it, the role of the Celestial Divination Bureau must have been substantial. The ‘drawing on soul’ spell that many people on the island were subjected to was a masterpiece of Zhou Hanzheng.

You Liang’s face is full of confusion. He doesn’t understand what Yan Zhengming is talking about.

Wu Changtian's back suddenly stiffens. Tension is all over his face.

Yan Zhengming glances at him with a vague smile. He lightly flicks the stone seal, making it ring out a soft sound. He turns it over and over in his hand, idly thinking that he still lacks a finger guard made of jewels. After a few wriggles of his thumb, he finally says apathetically, "Of course, you don't have to say anything if it's a secret of the court. It's been more than a hundred years. I'm getting out of touch. How many times has the throne changed hands? Does it still belong to that family?"

As Yan Zhengming thinks Wu Changtian won't say anything, he suddenly speaks, "What happened to Gu Yanxue was a suggestion of Zhou Hanzheng. The order to kill him was signed by the Celestial Divination Sect Leader himself."

Yan Zhengming pauses his movement. "Hmm? Wasn't Zhou Hanzheng a member of Azure Dragon Island in name? Did those fools never feel any gratitude for what Lord Gu granted them?"

Wu Changtian says, “It’s because he was the Left Guardian of the Lecture Hall, that the situation became clear: the Lecture Hall’s influence among the cultivators in the world had gone out of control.”

Normally, how many people would have the luck to become disciples of well-established sects?

The Nine Provinces are vast, but how many cultivators come from prestigious lineages? The majority of those who take up this path have to undergo the hardship of working out everything by themselves. For the rogue cultivators who cannot find a sect, the Lecture Hall of Azure Dragon Island is their only hope.

“Gu Yanxue ranked first among the Four Sages. His position was at the peak. In general, cultivators don’t have any regard for the Emperor or their

blood families. After Heaven and Earth comes the “Teacher”. You should know it yourself the implication of the ‘Teacher of the World’ title,” At this point, Wu Changtian lets out a sigh. His face becomes downcast, showing a rather out of place sorrow. “With just a word from Lord Gu, the cultivators who had received help from the Lecture Hall would level the entire world for him. It was a highly dangerous situation. Sect Leader Yan, everything could go wrong with just a wrinkle of temptation in his heart. Who could let him live?”

Yan Zhengming observes him without saying anything. Wu Changtian doesn’t avoid the stare. He looks back, as he says calmly, “Sect Leader Yan, since you asked about this matter, it seems like you don’t know something related to it. As I already opened my mouth, there is no point hiding it. The Lecture Hall was originally the ‘Hall of Initiation’, which was founded by your disciple grandfather Tong Ru together with the Four Sages.”

As soon as these words are spoken, silence reigns over the room.

Yan Zhengming stops all of his provocative, arrogant gestures. In a corner, Puddle's eyes are wide. Behind the decorative screen, Li Yun and Cheng Qian are stunned too.

Cheng Qian immediately remembers what Ji Qianli said to him on the Immortal Binding Platform. What that geezer said seemed to be complete nonsense. As it turns out, everything has a hidden meaning.

Killing intent fills the outer part of the room. Yan Zhengming's power is at 'joining the sheath' level. It doesn't manifest in an obvious manner, yet its oppressive weight is felt even more keenly, as it swirls above Wu Changtian's head.

Wu Changtian doesn't even stir. He continues. "Yes, it was indeed Tong Ru. Your ears aren't deceiving you. People think the Three Lives Mystic Site appears randomly, but it isn't the case. The key to open that Mystic Site is the heirloom of our Celestial Divination sect. If the person who enters it doesn't have a heart free of desire, they will fall to it. Indeed, Tong Ru went mad after leaving the Mystic Site. Ignoring the advice of the Four Sages, he

tossed his Sect Leader seal to his disciple, then climbed the hundred and eight thousand steps of the Tower of No Regret to take out the Wish Granting Stone.”

A cracking sound can be heard from Yan Zhengming’s knuckles. Had it not been for the password to the ‘Earth’ lock, the seal would be crushed by him already. He says with a chilly smile, “Can’t this world tolerate a person who wishes to do some good for others?”

Wu Changtian says evenly, “There is no tolerance for powerful people who can control the elements yet still get involved in worldly affairs. Sect Leader Yan, you should know well that cultivators are still human. Even someone like Xu Yingzhi, who pursued purity in the Vermillion Bird Tower, can you be sure he knows no temptation? Society is like a bowl of water. The water level may be high or low. There can be some ripples, but it must not tip to one side. No matter if it’s mortals or cultivators, balance is needed such that the water won’t spill out for things to last a long time.”

Wu Changtian tilts the cup of tea in his hand as he speaks, causing some of the tea to fall outside. Then he gracefully signs a spell with his finger. The water that spilled out is paused mid-air, then turns into a wheel of water, which quietly flies back into the cup.

You Liang fearfully cries out, “Senior brother!”

“This is the Celestial Divination sect. We act as the hand that keeps the world in balance,” Wu Changtian rolls up his sleeve. With a self-mocking smile, he says, “The secret of the Celestial Divination Sect has been passed on for hundreds of generations. The one who reveals that must die. As it turns out, I myself tell you about that. It’s nothing, Xiao-Liang. In the present, the Celestial Divination sect has fallen and become a bunch of dogs serving a master. Does it really matter if I keep the secret or not?”

Compared to his weapon, Sect Leader Yan’s impossible personality is much more impactful. When he is in a bad mood, even a non-sentient statue will be annoyed. However, no matter how he acts out, Wu Changtian’s amicable face remains impenetrable. Still, in this second, his friendly tone becomes

bitter. An indescribable hint of frost flashes under the warmth of his expression.

Wu Changtian pays no heed to Yan Zhengming's unwelcoming face and talks on like a monk in a meditation trance. "A person with a strong obsession will become more powerful in a shorter time compared to the average. They are also much more dangerous once they go mad during cultivation. Tong Ru made a wish to that stone which spoke to the demons of the heart. The stone demanded him to pay back with human lives. Tong Ru was a warrior of righteousness, so how could he kill the innocents indiscriminately, even in his madness? So, he chose to kill demonic cultivators, who had committed many evil deeds, as tributes for the stone. Because of this, he accidentally won the post of Lord Beiming."

"Unfortunately," Wu Changtian lets out a strange smile. Yan Zhengming understands what he is about to say next without him even speaking.

If a demonic cultivator wants to walk the path to the end and succeed, they must never spill blood. The karmic stain of blood can never be washed

clean, even if it's just a drop. Even if the person's heart is full of integrity, they'll inevitably fall into the endless killing rage. This is something everyone knows.

“In his killing rage, Tong Ru claimed the lives of countless innocent cultivators and mortals. Having no other choice, the Four Sages had to work together and deal with their old friend,” At this part, Wu Changtian lets out a long sigh. “Still, Tong Ru was indeed an extraordinary genius without match. He was even with all Four Sages in that battle. It was indeed... In the end, Xu Yingzhi exchanged his own life and lured Tong Ru into the Valley of No Sorrow. The Valley of No Sorrow is the place where lost souls of the world gather. In that place, black is black and white is white. No one can hide the sins they committed when alive there. Tong Ru's sin of killing was deep, so the Valley inevitably punished him, such that he perished there.”

Those few sketchy descriptions made the listeners feel a chill down their spine.

Wu Changtian lets out a laugh and shakes his head. “Unexpectedly, Gu Yanxue had short memory. Learning nothing from that battle, he changed the name of the ‘Hall of Initiation’ to the Lecture Hall and moved to Azure Dragon Island. If back then the Celestial Divination Bureau hadn’t arranged for Tong Ru to go mad, the lineage of Fuyao Sect wouldn’t have been broken. Everyone here would probably still be peacefully cultivating on Fuyao Mountain. You might not be able to attain such great achievements you currently have, but you wouldn’t have had to live an exiled life at Azure Dragon Island. Your disciple brother wouldn’t have fallen to the ‘soul drawing’ spell of Zhou Hanzheng. The current great disaster of the demonic dragon wouldn’t have happened. Well, we Celestial Divination sect don’t avoid the consequences of our own actions. As the Heavens will it, our lifeline is coming to an end.”

Wu Changtian robs Yan Zhengming of everything he is about to say, so Sect Leader Yan has nothing left for his reply.

Wu Changtian says, “I still have something else to deliver to you, Sect Leader Yan.”

He takes out a scroll from his robe and lifts it with both hands in Yan Zhengming's direction, saying, "Sect Leader Yan, please have a look."

As soon as he opens the scroll, Yan Zhengming feels that something is wrong. There is a ringing sound in his ears. The Sect Leader seal, which has been lying quietly on his chest, begins to heat up, as if it is resonating with this unknown scroll. The starry 'Heaven' lock suddenly appears in front of his eyes. The glitter dots swirl maniacally and form a huge whirlwind.

The aura of Fuyao Mountain swells up as the scroll slowly opens. The upper part has only names on it, names of Fuyao Sect Leaders throughout the ages. The lower part records the cultivation paths they took. At the end, there is the red stamp of a seal. Yan Zhengming has never seen the words on that stamp, but he knows what it says.

He unconsciously blurts out, "Demon Vanquishing Seal..."

At that moment, the silence of the room is broken by the glare of a sword. All You Liang feels is an overwhelming frostiness all over him. He instinctively raises his sword to defend himself, but he can't move. It is as if he has fallen into an invisible sea of ice, which freezes everything around him. Even his gaze has become ice. He has already formed his primordial spirit, but he can't even lift his arm.

Such power with just one strike!

As soon as he senses that something strange is underfoot, Cheng Qian immediately flies out from behind the decorative screen. He places the blade on You Liang's neck, and angrily thrusts the sheath at Wu Changtian's back. His frost-filled killing intent firmly locked down these two, while vehemently striking at the resonance between the scroll and the Sect Leader seal.

Under Shuang Ren, You Liang's arm shakes uncontrollably. Cheng Qian's gaze is like the ice lake of Ming Ming Valley. "Daring to bring something like this to Fuyao Estate, do you want to die?"

Yan Zhengming closes the scroll. With a strange expression, he calls with a low voice, “Xiao-Qian.”

Cheng Qian’s killing intent subdues a little, as he turns to look at Yan Zhengming.

Yan Zhengming says, “Release them first.”

Cheng Qian finally lets out a disgruntled ‘hmm’ and withdraws his killer sword.

Wu Changtian takes a deep breath and quietly moves his spiritual energy around his body. It takes two rounds of circulation for the frost on his back to completely dissipate. He clasps his hands and salutes Cheng Qian

politely. “Cheng Zhenren, you have only cultivated for a hundred years, but you are already at such a level. How admirable!”

Cheng Qian, who is set out to play the nasty one, replies immediately, “My ability is not worthy of such admiration. It’s only enough to kill you.”

Wu Changtian says, “Cheng Zhenren, you misunderstand me. All I did was to return this object to its original owner. That is the ‘Demon Vanquishing Scroll’. It originally belonged to Fuyao Sect, and contains thirty oaths that were signed between the ancestors of our Celestial Divination sect and your esteemed sect. Sect Leader Yan should know already whether it’s real or fake.”

Cheng Qian raises his eyebrows.

Wu Changtian says, “Of course, Fuyao Mountain is still sealed off, and the Fuyao Sect Leader has established a different Fuyao Estate. Strictly

speaking, you aren't really bound by the oath of ancient people. There is no need for you to comply with it. However, how many innocent lives will this battle between the righteous and demonic sides?"

Wearing a frosty face, Cheng Qian is about to speak, but Yan Zhengming cuts in first. "The oath has the demon-vanquishing seal, but it doesn't require us to be commanded by you. It doesn't prevent us from dealing as we see fit with the Celestial Divination Bureau goons either."

Wu Changtian says, "You think too highly of us. Sect Leader Yan, if our side wronged you in any way, feel free to deal with us as you see fit."

Yan Zhengming glares. "Official Wu, you sure have a lot of integrity. May I ask how many people that sect of yours signed this oath with?"

Wu Changtian just smiles without saying anything. Obviously, he doesn't want to reveal that.

Yan Zhengming waves his hand, “Han Tan, see our guests off.”

Wu Changtian pulls out an invitation card and places it on the table. He salutes the host properly, then says politely to Puddle, “Miss, no need for you to trouble yourself on our account. Please stay here.”

Waiting for them to leave, Li Yun emerges from behind the decorative screen and asks, “What’s wrong?”

Having said that, he picks up the opened scroll on the table and quickly goes through it. Staring fixedly at the strange demon-vanquishing seal at the end, he asks, “Is this really...”

Cheng Qian says, “This bullshit oath was made by the Sect Leaders of the previous generations. What do we have to do with it? Let’s throw it in a fire and be done with it.”

“I can’t burn it. The oath is linked to the Sect Leader seal,” Yan Zhengming’s expression stiffens. “If I don’t comply, it’ll be taken as me not accepting the Sect Leader seal, and from then on, my awareness in the Sect Leader seal will be removed...”

Yan Zhengming taps lightly on the end part of the scroll, where his name is listed as the latest Sect Leader. “Which is the same as me betraying our sect.”

Li Yun’s mind, which is rich in ways to cheat, quickly comes up with a solution. He immediately says, “That’s nothing. As the saying goes, ‘even murderers can become Buddhas’. That so-called oath doesn’t prevent a cultivator from leaving their sect then returning. What can they do when you take off the Sect Leader Seal, burn this oath, then come back?”

Yan Zhengming angrily glares at him. “Don’t talk nonsense. Your petty tricks are always useless for something serious!”

Having said that, he waves his hand. The Heaven lock in the Sect Leader seal appears in the shape of a giant starry clock. One end of the lock is pointing at the scroll.

“If all of us turn our back at our Fuyao Sect, the Fuyao lineage will come to an end, and the Sect Leader seal will definitely self-destruct. When it comes to that, Fuyao Mountain will never appear again. What do you think we should do then? Hang ourselves in front of our Master’s grave?”

Everyone is quiet. Puddle picks up the card Wu Changtian left behind, muttering, “Tai Xing Congress on the fifteenth of the first month... Most senior brother, what is this for? Are we going?”

Yan Zhenming considers not replying.

Li Yun says, “Celestial Divination Bureau has been travelling day and night to deliver summon cards everywhere. They obviously want to let the whole world know about this gathering. If I were Han Yuan, I’d show up with my side and deal with it once and for all. This is an arrangement for a battle, isn’t it?”

The demonic cultivators of Nanjiang don’t follow any system or order. They wreak havoc everywhere and cause terrible hardship to civilians. The Celestial Divination Bureau doesn’t have enough power or charisma to unite people. If the two sides just keep fighting at whims like in the present, peace will never return. The best course of action is to find an empty place

and gather everyone there for a fight to their heart's content. Tai Xing is that place.

“If I were Han Yuan, I wouldn't go to this noisy gathering,” Yan Zhengming says in a low voice, “I would take advantage of everyone being in Tai Xing, and go straight to the Capital to kill the Emperor and destroy the lair of the Celestial Divination Bureau. It'd be more convenient like that, wouldn't it?”

Li Yun says, “There's no way to know if what that Wu guy rambled was true or not, but I've heard some other news. Currently, there is definitely a conflict within the Celestial Divination Bureau. It looks like the original core of the Celestial Divination sect wants to separate from the imperial court. They don't necessarily care if the Emperor is dead or alive.”

Then, sorrow clouds Li Yun's face as he says, “Han Yuan... Oh man, he must be starting this great fight as a revenge against the Celestial Divination Bureau. But consequently he will have to bear the retribution for the damages caused by the Nanjiang demonic cultivators, won't he?”

With a grave face, Yan Zhengming turns and says, “Send Zhe Shi a message that we’d like to find Han Yuan before the Celestial Divination Bureau.”

Cheng Qian, who has been quiet so far, suddenly speaks up, “I keep feeling that something is not right.”

Li Yun asks, “What?”

“There is a saying that ‘Compassion and honour emerge when the Way is lost. Deception appears when there is wit. Filial piety is formed when there is conflict in the family. Devoted officials become known when the nation falls in chaos’. The Celestial Divination Bureau claims to ‘maintain the Way in the name of the Heavens’, but doesn’t that course of action itself contradict the principle of ‘the Way lies in following the flows of nature’?” Cheng Qian frowns, “That kind of attitude is really out of sync with what our Master taught us. I can’t think of any reason why our Fuyao ancestors would sign this kind of oath with the Celestial Divination sect. There must be something else going on. Second Brother, I remember that when we

lived on Azure Dragon Island, we found a chronicle of the island, which recorded many major events. Do we still have it?”

“Probably,” Li Yun says, “Back then, Zhe Shi was worried that what we brought from Fuyao Mountain and the books we copied and collected on Azure Dragon Island would get lost, so he brought them with him all the time. That’s how we still have those, even after our hasty escape from Azure Dragon Island. Have a look in the new Library Tower behind the bamboo grove.”

Hearing that, Cheng Qian immediately stands up. At the same time, he recalls what Ji Qianli told him. There are quite a few clues in the words of that weird geezer.

Following Li Yun’s direction, Cheng Qian goes to the bamboo grove and finds the reputed Library Tower.

Although this place is also called Library Tower, it can't compare to the old nine-floor Library Tower where books from the whole world were collected. It is just a small building with two floors made from wood, which is so fragile that it looks like it is about to collapse.

The first floor stores the cultivation techniques Yan Zhengming and the others have collected from everywhere, which include both practices of the righteous path and shady tricks. Some of them were already incomplete at the time of purchase and got revised by Yan Zhengming or Li Yun into new sets of techniques.

The second floor has none other than the properties of Fuyao Sect. There are scriptures copied by Yan Zhengming, guides to the Fuyao Wooden Sword that were revised by Cheng Qian himself, as well as various books they brought with them when they left Fuyao Mountain. These books have been through many ups and downs. Although they all have protective spells on the covers to protect them from humidity and pests, the sorrowful mark of time can still be seen on the pages.

Cheng Qian longingly runs his fingers across the spines of the books. He has never missed Fuyao Mountain as much as that moment. Besides the 'human' lock, they are separated from home by the unknown dangers and the unaccountable conspiracies around the Demon Vanquishing Seal.

The chronicle of Azure Dragon Island has a distinctive mark, so Cheng Qian finds it quickly from the chaotic pile of books. Fuyao Sect hasn't accepted any new disciple. With the current tiny group, all scriptures and records are tossed haphazardly here, which no one will touch if there is nothing they need to look up. As Cheng Qian pulls out the chronicle, several other books fall down in a cloud of dust.

Clicking his tongue, Cheng Qian bends down to pick up the books. He discovers that there are two copies of the Scripture of Serenity.

Who made the extra copy?

Cheng Qian picks up the books and dusts them off. The handwriting in one copy is delicate and graceful, which is likely Li Yun's work. The writing on the copy of the other one is careless, like that of a child's, with stick-like strokes. That's definitely his most senior brother's handwriting during the teenage years.

In his childhood, Cheng Qian took over the copying punishment for Yan Zhengming so many times that he could imitate his handwriting flawlessly. That's why he can recognise whose work the book is with just a glance.

As he is feeling a bit upset, Cheng Qian opens the Scripture of Serenity copy in the bottom. He is startled to discover that there is another cover below the 'scripture' cover. On that cover, there is a picture of a person surrounded by fabulous flowers, who is flirtatiously holding a jade flute in hand and smiling at the reader. Next to the figure is a small line: "A Life of Elegant Pleasure"

Cheng Qian: "..."

What... What is this?!

After a moment of confusion, he opens the book as if possessed. The content of the fake Scripture of Serenity is full of variety, with both prose and verse along side illustrations. It tells a love story that happens in a brothel of the mortal world. A handsome scholar and a courtesan were intoxicated with love and made their vow, but ended up separating. It's interspersed with songs, both delicate and crude. The storytelling is quite skillful and emotional. Some parts are even inspired.

The thing is, the illustrations are unimaginable. There is no restraint to them at all. They do not only show everything of the main characters without hiding anything, but only depict all kinds of intimate acts. It can be said that they are an excellent guide for the realm of "pursuing pleasures".

One cannot look directly at those.

Cheng Qian flips through some pages. He can see that no illustration is repeated. Additionally, there are countless fantastical techniques of unknown origin. Compared to what is shown in these pictures, the demonic cultivators in Zhaoyang City were just some barbaric provincials!

Cheng Qian dares not look too closely. As he is about to close the book, he is reminded that his most senior brother disguised the outer cover as the Scripture of Serenity. A strange expression falls on his face.

Before he finishes processing how weirded out he feels, there is the sound of quick footsteps. Yan Zhengming quickly climbs up the stairs of the Library Tower as he asks, “Found anything yet?”

In his spot, Cheng Qian is so startled that his hands tremble. The fake Scripture of Serenity slips from his hands and falls on the ground, revealing

a scene of some pleasurable undertaking.

Yan Zhengming: “...”

As the saying goes, this is like lightning striking from a clear sky. In this moment, Cheng Qian feels that heavenly tribulations can't compare to this.

After a second of being at a loss, he seizes his chance. Pretending that nothing is wrong, he assumes a calm expression and moves to pick up the questionable book. However, it is snatched out of his hand.

Sect Leader Yan has been occupied with many serious businesses, so he has forgotten all of his adolescent bad habits. As soon as he sees the book, he can't help his temper. His anger erupts, as he feels like someone defiled a pristine ground he had been protecting with all his might.

He swats away Cheng Qian's hand and says angrily, "Where does this filth come from? Didn't you say you want to find the chronicle of Azure Dragon Island? Why is this with you?"

Having no other choice, Cheng Qian weakly explains, "It fell down from the shelf."

Yan Zhengming picks up the book. The pictures inside are an assault to his eyes. With an aggressive air, he asks, "Did you open it?"

Cheng Qian: "..."

Yan Zhengming's breath shortens as his anger heats up even more. He scolds, "I thought you'd be less trouble than the other two. Now look at you! Why are you even reading this? Don't you know that you still have

some internal injury? Why don't you concentrate and keep a calm mind for your healing instead of reading this kind of nonsense?"

The more he talks, the angrier he is. He taps Cheng Qian's chest with the book with so much force that it is nearly torn. "Shameless!"

Cheng Qian doesn't argue back. He doesn't know what he should say either.

Yan Zhengming heatedly says, "If I knew which villain put this thing in our library tower, I will..."

Cheng Qian speaks up in a small voice, "Senior Brother, it was probably you..."

Yan Zhengming says, "...What?"

Cheng Qian delicately uses his fingers to turn the book that was nearly crushed by Yan Zhengming and points at the fake 'Scripture of Serenity' title.

Completely at a loss, Yan Zhengming stares fixedly at the three familiar characters.

Cheng Qian hastens to 'show his understanding'. He says, "Senior Brother, it's not a big deal. Back then you were still young and didn't understand everything yet, I know."

Before he finishes, he himself feels that it isn't quite right. If Yan Zhengming already mixed this kind of stuff among the sect's teachings when he was 'still young' and brought it out of Fuyao Mountain in secret

with him on a long journey, then isn't Cheng Qian implying him to be a rotten playboy from birth?

As expected, Yan Zhengming's ears redden as his face goes through several shades. He snatches the fabulous picture book and turns away without a word.

Something moves in Cheng Qian's heart. He leans on the railings. In the faint light of the protective spells against molds and pests, his usually apathetic face looks much softer.

“Most senior brother,” Cheng Qian calls out to Yan Zhengming and boldly asks, “Zhuang Nanxi told me that he liked a rogue cultivator, to the point that his feelings wouldn't have changed even if she had been a mortal. When you were young, you once read these, uhm, old stories. Have there been such people who would ‘like that person despite a mortal's short life’?”

The library tower is a bit dark. Half of Yan Zhengming's face is hidden in the shadow of a shelf, so it's hard to see his expression. He doesn't make a sound. He doesn't even seem to be breathing, as if he turned into a statue.

After a long while, Yan Zhengming asks an irrelevant question, "Who is Zhuang Nanxi?"

Cheng Qian says, "A talkative disciple of White Tiger Estate."

Yan Zhengming's voice suddenly becomes frosty. "From now on, you should stop hanging out with such indecent people. You have already given up the pleasures of the senses to overcome Heavenly Tribulations, so shouldn't you know what 'maintain a pure mind to pursue the Way' is? If you continue to think about nonsense, then take your ass back to Qingan Abode and do it there!"

Melancholy falls on Cheng Qian's eyes.

The footsteps become fainter and fainter. The door of the Library Tower makes a clicking sound, as it automatically closes after being opened thanks to the spell cast on it. A chilly breeze blows by.

Cheng Qian quietly picks up the books he carelessly let fall down and puts them back on the shelf. Finally, he grabs the chronicle of Azure Dragon Island. Sitting down at the bench by the window, he opens it.

Thanks to a clever design, the lamp on the wall lights up. Cheng Qian flips through some pages, and suddenly feels that everything is so pointless.

All these years, whether against the Heavens, the other cultivators, or death, he has never taken a step backwards. Even now, he doesn't believe that there is anything in this world that he can't do.

It isn't until that moment that he understands how things don't always go according to his wish.

Maybe it's because his injured primordial spirit hasn't been properly healed, that Cheng Qian feels overwhelmed by fatigue. Looking at the boring writing in the chronicle, he suddenly thinks, "What's the point of becoming a powerful, renowned cultivator? Wouldn't one end up being envied and a target for conspiracies? What's the point of trying to reach ascension and become immortal, when one has to put away all human feelings in order to walk on the Great Way that no one can see? Wouldn't one end up having to watch the world fade away?"

Their lives aren't even worth as much as the mortals, short as theirs are.

Cheng Qian's heartbeats slow down as he becomes himself again. He feels that his heart is tied up in a complicated knot.

Perhaps he really needs to go into seclusion and refine himself, since he keeps coming back to that topic...

As Cheng Qian thinks that ascension is meaningless, he skims through the chronicle of Azure Dragon Island without looking specifically for what is relevant to Fuyao Sect. Suddenly, he pauses, as realisation dawns on him.

Although Azure Dragon Island is in the middle of the sea, its chronicle covers many other territories. Besides the events on the island, the chroniclers took a page from the mortals' history records and noted down major events of cultivators everywhere.

Cheng Qian detects a pattern in the chronicle. The people who took three hundred years to form their primordial spirits basically stopped at that level.

Nothing extraordinary happened to them. They lived out their lifespans to about a thousand years old then died.

The other type, whether thanks to a firm heart or natural talent, formed their primordial spirits very early. Some of their stories are recorded in the chronicle. They must have been important people of their times. However, they all went into a hermit life and disappeared, or became mad from qi deviation, or met an untimely end due to disasters.

In the entire chronicle of Azure Dragon Island, nothing is said about ascension.

Rubbing his forehead, Cheng Qian tries to gather his scattered mind, as doubt rises in his heart. Is it the case that people who ascended were too humble? Or can it be... since the chronicle of Azure Dragon Island was started until the Island fell, no one ever successfully ascended?

Cheng Qian puts away the chronicle of Azure Dragon Island, then walks quickly downstairs. Carefully directing his spiritual energy, he makes a sign to the spell-carved bookshelf, and says in a low voice, “I want to read records on ‘Ascension’.”

The wooden bookshelf, which is covered with a frost-like layer of spiritual energy, shakes a little, then some old records give off a faint light. Cheng Qian takes them out one by one and brings them back to Qingan Abode.

That day, Yan Zhengming lost his temper at Cheng Qian. He immediately regretted it as soon as he left, but he had no other way. Heavens witness, when Cheng Qian leaned against the railing and asked him that question, he felt as if his chest and everything inside had been crushed by a huge boulder, which both shook and hurt him. Using anger as the cover, he ran away. In the days after, he tries to avoid Cheng Qian.

However, he quickly discovers that it is redundant, because Cheng Qian hasn’t left the second Qingan Abode since then. They live next door, but don’t see each other at all in ten days.

In the middle of that situation, Zhe Shi sends a letter.

Their courier is still Puddle, who can turn into a bird at will. To hide her increasingly conspicuous bird form, Li Yun uses his talent to turn her into a sparrow.

Filled with murderous resentment against her Second Brother, Puddle the sparrow flies off. However, she quickly discovers that this form is very useful. A small bird can get in almost anywhere without being detected. Only flies can be sneakier than that.

Thanks to that, she finally meets Zhe Shi.

“Zhe Shi-ge said, Celestial Divination Bureau has many levels. The initiates have to work as spies for at least ten years and up to a hundred years outside. Then they have to go through an extremely stringent round of inspection to ensure that their history is completely clean before they can officially become a member. However, something happened recently, such that the internal disciples fell out in a deadly conflict. After just a night, half of the familiar faces disappeared. Then came the rebellion of Fourth... ah, the demonic dragon. The Celestial Divination Bureau needed more hands, so they were recruiting. The cultivation of Zhe Shi-ge and some spies like him was decent, and they hadn't made any mistake, so they were allowed in. They were sent to ambush someone near Tai Yin Mountain. The order wasn't specific, but Zhe Shi-ge said the target was Fourth Brother.”

Tai Yin Mountain is not far away from their home Fuyao Mountain.

Yan Zhengming makes his decision without hesitation. “The estate is to be sealed off tomorrow. We'll depart for Tai Yin Mountain right away.”

Li Yun hastily runs after him and asks, “We go to Tai Yin Mountain and then what? What are we going to do? Are you planning to help the Celestial Divination Bureau capture Han Yuan? Or are we breaking the oath and opposing the Demon Vanquishing Seal to help Han Yuan get his vengeance?”

“We must comply with the oath of the Demon Vanquishing Seal,” Yan Zhengming says in a voice that brokers no argument.

Hearing that, everyone’s heart is heavy.

After a beat, Yan Zhengming continues, “However, we must not let Han Yuan be captured by the Celestial Divination Bureau. We must stop him before the Tai Xing Grand Congress begins and take him here. He is one of us Fuyao Sect. Even if he destroyed a corner of the sky and had to be cut into pieces, that decision is not for outsiders to make.”

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Liu Yao - Chapter 81

Having decisively made his declaration, Yan Zhengming stands up to leave. However, just as he opens the door, Li Yun calls him back.

Li Yun averts his eyes and says with some hesitation, “Oh, yeah, there is still something else...”

Following his gaze, Yan Zhengming glances at the side. “What?”

There is a voice in the air. “It’s me... I... I... Ouch!”

The sound of something heavy falling down can be heard. Yan Zhengming quietly withdraws his leg.

“Nian Dada, well, has been staying in a guest room of Fuyao Estate all this time,” Li Yun smiles ruefully. “He insists on begging Xiao Qian to take him in as a disciple, and vows to be a member of our Fuyao Sect at all costs. He said we could test him in any way we liked, he would face even Hell.”

With a smashed face, Nian Dada looks up. He wipes the blood on his nose. He grins to Cheng Qian. His voice is warbled, as if his teeth broke or he bit on his mouth when he fell. ““aster, pwease accept ‘e.”

Li Yun says, “Xiao Qian was in seclusion in the last few days so he had no time to meet this kid. He has been loitering around here for a while.”

Cheng Qian surprisedly asks, “Why haven’t you left yet?”

Nian Dada wipes his face. With clearer words, he puffs his chest and says proudly, “I won’t give up!”

Yan Zhengming grimaces. Fuyao Sect has been on the wrong path enough times. In the previous generation, the nominal disciple became a half dead half alive infamous villain, while the actual disciple ended up a weasel. In this generation, Yan Zhengming, as the most senior disciple, knows exactly what he is like.

For two consecutive generations, the sect has not a single reliable disciple. If this generation takes in a 'stick like glue'¹ one, will there be any dignity left for the sect?

He should absolutely stop this tradition of treating the recruitment of disciples like a joke, in order to prevent damage for the future generations!

“No,” Yan Zhengming says in a voice that brooks no argument. “Pardon our lack of courtesy. We have to leave due to an emergency, so I’m afraid we can’t entertain any guest. Please feel free to leave!”

Nian Dada takes in a deep breath and says loudly, “I swear I will not shy from any menial task. I will serve you diligently. Sect Leader, please let me join Fuyao Sect!”

Too lazy to continue the argument, Yan Zhengming says, “Li Yun, send Nian Mingming a notice. No way he’ll look away when his son betrays him and joins a different sect.”

Li Yun says blandly, “Oh, you don’t know it, but the bunch in Mingming Valley are just some random cultivators. They occupy that mountain and enjoy the tributes in exchange for helping the villagers below eliminate some low-level monsters. Besides the assignments from the Lord of the Valley, the disciples can just leave and join other sects if they don’t want to waste their time there. Through that, Mingming Valley may even gain some valuable connections. It works out too well for them, so why should they mind it?”

Yan Zhengming: “...”

How can there be such a shameless and lazy sect in this world?

Yan Zhengming says, “You fall off from your sword. How can our Fuyao Sect accept you?”

The three disciple brothers and sister behind him are speechless at how their most senior brother can make such an unreasonable demand. Back then, when they joined the sect, they couldn’t even hold a sword firmly, let alone ride it.

Nian Dada says resolutely, “Sect Leader, I’m aware how limited my ability is. I will definitely cultivate as best as possible, so that the sect won’t be ashamed of me.”

“Do we even need to look at your cultivation to be ashamed?” Giving the boy a glance, Yan Zhengming intentionally picks a fight. “Go away. As long as I am the Sect Leader, our sect will not accept ugly people.”

Nian Dada: “...”

He has no reply for such an out-there argument.

Nian Dada helplessly glances at Cheng Qian, whose mind is being occupied by something else. That line from Yan Zhengming reminds Cheng Qian of various incidents in the past that he has half-forgotten. Indeed, ever since he was young, their most senior brother has never limited his vanity to his own appearance. His temperament is uniquely impossible, such that he refuses to touch food that doesn't look good.

Cheng Qian looks at the old indigo robe that he has worn since forever. For the first time since his birth, he feels that he is dressing a bit messily.

After thrashing about a bit in his kneeling position, Nian Dada manages to come up with something. “Sect Leader, I can’t do anything about my face, but I’ll do everything to improve my aura, so that I’ll become an ethereal cultivator.”

Glancing at Cheng Qian, he hastens to add some flattery. “I’ll try to be like Master!”

Unfortunately, that’s a wrong tack to take. Yan Zhengming thinks, “Who do you think you are, daring to compare yourself to Xiao-Qian like that?”

The pressure from a sword cultivator who has reached the ‘Joining the Sheath’ level is no joke. Nian Dada feels that he would be flattened even if he had ten spines. Again and again he reminds himself that this is a test he

has to pass to join the sect, so he grits his teeth and tries not to give in. However, within seconds, blood begins to splash on the floor.

Cheng Qian, who has been silent from the beginning, speaks up, “Senior Brother, please let him off. It isn’t a bad thing that he is so determined.”

For ten days, Yan Zhengming had been very anxious because he couldn’t find an opening to talk to Cheng Qian. As soon as he hears Cheng Qian’s voice, euphoria fills his heart. However, he has to reign his feelings in. Keeping a ‘Sect Leader’ face with some difficulty, he lets out one syllable, “Huh?”

Cheng Qian says, “Before I left Mingming Valley, he had waited outside all night for me. Then he finds his way to this Estate. It looks like he has some steel. Back then, Azure Dragon Island took in many rogue cultivators who couldn’t even absorb qi. His control of the sword is sloppy, but at least he can ride his sword shakily.”

In Cheng Qian's opinion, when it comes to recruiting disciples, as long as the candidates have an honest character, there is no need to be too picky about other things. Their sect has always been 'the Master leads the way to the gate, but cultivation depends on the self'. Whether one has great talents or not, there is always something one can do.

With just a few words from Cheng Qian, Yan Zhengming, who was determined to act tough, immediately melts. He says, "I find his potential pretty limited."

Cheng Qian smiles, "As the saying goes, one may not care about the monk but still has to respect the Buddha. I still owe Mingming Valley a sentimental favour."

Yan Zhengming says nothing. Puddle wants to share her opinion too, but Li Yun quickly stops her. They quietly watch their Sect Leader's circus from the side.

As expected, despite wishing to send Nian Dada back to Mingming Valley with a kick just a few seconds ago, Yan Zhengming cheerfully makes a concession, “Fine, if you say so. We can feed one more mouth. Things are chaotic because of the war, so let’s give him a verbal acceptance first. We can hold a proper initiation ritual for him later, when we are back to Fuyao Mountain.”

Li Yun says loudly, “Sect Leader and senior brother, why are you so agreeable when it’s Xiao-Qian who makes the suggestion?”

Yan Zhengming: “...”

He aggressively glares at Li Yun, then runs off without daring to look at Cheng Qian’s expression.

Cheng Qian taps Nian Dada's shoulders, "Follow me."

Thus, he leads the disciple who volunteers himself out of the room.

Staring at Cheng Qian's retreating back, Li Yun nudges Puddle with his elbow. "What is your conclusion from this incident?"

Puddles thinks for a moment, then says sincerely, "In the future, if I want something, I should go convince Third Brother first. With his approval, our most senior brother will agree, even if he doesn't like it!"

Li Yun: "..."

Puddle asks, “Did I say something wrong?”

Li Yun pats her head, “No, kid, you’re right.”

Puddle swats his hand away and asks, “Second Brother, did you have an initiation ceremony of your own? What is the precept that you got?”

Li Yun falls silent. The trouble-making smile on his face fades away too. In its place is an air of nostalgia that Puddle has never seen before. He says in a soft voice, “Our Master said I was too smart. Being too smart would make me impatient, which could easily lead to anxiety. In the long run, it would cause me both emotional and moral injuries. Therefore, he gave me ‘Be simple’ as my precept.”

Having said that, he looks down and sighs, as if knowing himself that he has failed his Master’s teachings.

Puddle says, full of admiration, “Don’t sigh like that. I don’t even have a precept.”

When their Master passed away, she couldn’t even talk. There was no time to give her a precept. As such a step is missing all this time, it seems like she can’t become a full adult.

Puddles mutters, “Second Brother, in your opinion, what would Master give me as my precept if he were still alive?”

Li Yun says, “Usually, a precept describes how one’s flaw can be balanced out with one’s strength. In your case, it’d be...”

Puddle looks at him expectantly.

Li Yun says, “Perhaps it’d be ‘Featherless’?”

He became the first senior brother in the history of Fuyao Sect to be beaten by the youngest junior sister.

Ten days later at the Tai Yin central plain.

The shape of Tai Yin Mountain is flat. Compared to Tai Xing Mountain, where the immortals frequent, it is more down to earth.

Along about one hundred miles west of the mountain, there are many villages and watchtowers, which are connected by a great road full of traffic. The commerce is bustling, and the fertile fields, tilled by numerous oxen, stretch to the horizon.

According to legends, there is a dwelling of the immortals not far from there. That place is hidden to mortal eyes. Only the 'fated' people can see a faint shadow of a mountain where the divine cranes fly.

However, in the present, the region around Tai Yin Mountain has changed drastically.

Half a month ago, the number of soldiers around Tai Yin Mountain doubled. With their sharp weapons, they brought about an air of emergency.

In the following days, many immortals fly in from their swords, aloof from the mortals. From the soldiers in the fortress, rumours spread that those immortals are creating an array to fight against someone.

No one forces the civilians here to leave. However, the local officials posted many notices that recommended the people to move to another place. The notices also said that those who moved would be paid a stipend as support for when they settled down in a strange place.

Panic spreaded as soon as the notices appeared in public. As the array gradually formed around Tai Yin Mountain, the surrounding areas became increasingly abandoned. The terrified civilians queued up to receive the stipend from dawn to dusk. After just a few days, except for those who are too old and weak, most of the houses have been abandoned.

When the demonic cultivators receive the invitation for the battle in Tai Xing, they'll inevitably cross the Tai Yin area. As Tai Yin Mountain is very close to his former sect Fuyao, Han Yuan the demonic dragon will definitely pause here. Following his orders, You Liang has been at this place a few days early to wait and ambush the demonic dragon, while a grand Demon Execution Array is constructed around Tai Yin mountain. Even if the demonic dragon can't be completely contained, a significant part of his power must be destroyed while everyone else is focused on the gathering in Tai Xing.

You Liang stands on the high fortress and looks down at the lines of people leaving with their families, who look like ants from that distance.

In his heart, You Liang knows too well that these people will not find safety when they leave the Tai Yin Mountain area. On the contrary, they have no protection at all. If they are unlucky enough to encounter a demonic cultivator from the North, they will be like an insect in the hand of a cruel child and end up being torn to shreds.

However, You Liang also knows that these people must leave. Because the mortals need food to live with all the associated bodily functions, their spiritual energy is polluted. If so many civilians stayed, the grand Demon Execution Array will be disturbed.

He clutches his sword tightly. His senior brother once told him that the sword is named “Tan Xin”². When the sword was forged, the swordsmith was careless and let a bit of incense ash fall into the metal. When the sword

was formed, it carried less aggression than other swords. Therefore, it's considered a 'Sword of Compassion'.

The young sword cultivator takes a deep breath, as he feels a chill from the handle of the 'Sword of Compassion' in his hand.

At that moment, a cultivator with messy hair flies in on his sword and lands in front of You Liang. He makes his salute and says, "Official You, someone powerful has trespassed in the array and disturbs the southwest front line".

That cultivator is an outer staff of the Celestial Divination Bureau. Other people called him 'Straw-like Zhang'. Because of his skills with arrays, he is assigned to Tai Yin Mountain and has the authority to manage the creation of the grand Demon Execution Array.

Hearing that report, You Liang puts his thoughts aside and concentrates his spiritual energy in his eyes. Activating the 'Eagle Eye' spell, he looks into

the direction the Zhang cultivator reported. He is startled to meet the eyes of that person. The newcomers are no other than the Fuyao Sect group.

Yan Zhengming apathetically looks at him. After a second, a gust of sharp sword energy charges directly at You Liang's face.

Terrified, You Liang dares not counter it directly. He withdraws a good distance before raising his sword. However, that seemingly killer sword energy just teases gently at the sheath of his sword, then disperses.

You Liang pants heavily. He can't help but feel that he just luckily avoided being stabbed. That attack shakes him so badly that his palms are covered in cold sweats.

Sword cultivators have exceptional mind and spirit. They can face anything as long as they can still reach for their sword energy. However, 'stopping at the right time' and 'casual but precise control of energy' are already beyond

You Liang's capability. At that moment, he understands that the gap between him and Yan Zhengming isn't just the 'Divine Realm'. It's a whole world.

"Official You!" The Zhang cultivator looks scared. He steps forward and says, "Who dares to be so insolent? Should I send a unit to follow them?"

You Liang's face is white as a sheet. With all his might, he tries to reach for his words. "That person is a sword cultivator who has reached the Divine Realm level. Even the Four Sages have to watch their steps around him. What can you do? Go there to be sent back?"

The Zhang cultivator is stunned.

You Liang angrily yells, "Go away!"

Having yelled at that person, he himself walks off, his head hanging with unbearable shame and anger.

As soon as You Liang turns away, the respectful flattery on the face of the Zhang cultivator immediately disappears. He throws a malicious glance at You Liang's direction. Then he looks at where the sword energy came from with a strange expression.

Some cultivators gather by that person's side. One of them says in a low voice, "Zhang-Dage, those so-called 'Great Sects' Cultivators' sneer at our array creation as some petty tricks. How insufferably arrogant they are."

The Zhang cultivator gives a chilly smile, "He is just a junior who newly formed a primordial spirit. He dares to lecture us while his cultivation base is still shaky. What a fop. Who is the target of this Demon Execution Array that we are making? Han Yuan the Demonic Dragon! No matter if he has reached Divine or Infernal Realm of sword cultivation, all of them will die with just a simple move from us!"

A cultivator hesitantly asks, “Zhang-Dage, you mean...”

That Zhang cultivator gives the group some instructions. At a distance, Li Yun frowns at Yan Zhengming, “Sect Leader and senior brother, what are you doing?”

“Humiliate them,” Yan Zhengming casually clasps his hands behind his back. “Can’t you tell? We can’t resist the Demon Vanquishing Seal trick of the Celestial Divination Bureau, but we aren’t so helpless as to be unable to make their members eat a humble pie.”

Li Yun diligently gives his advice, “Come on, the Celestial Divination Bureau has many petty assholes. To deal with such types, we have to use their tactics. We can lie and deceive them, or ambush and kill them when they’re unprepared. Don’t provoke them. When a poisonous snake bites you out of spite, you get hurt too.”

Yan Zhengming easily forgets old transgressions. He doesn't like fighting. Nor is he bloodthirsty. However, he has a bad habit. After living at the absolute bottom for a long time, he is stubbornly arrogant. He has always insulted people to their faces easily, but while it was unintentional in the past, as an adult he intentionally leaves no way for the other party to step back and escape humiliation.

His sword cultivation has been so advanced that he disregards even the Four Sages. Why should he care about a sword cultivator who has just formed their primordial spirit?

However, how can someone who lives amongst people not give the other side any way to retreat from the situation? Li Yun can't help but feel anxious.

1. "Nian Dada" is homophonous with "very sticky" in Mandarin apparently.

2. Tan Xin . Roughly 'heart of sandalwood'

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The Fuyao Sect group makes a detour to this area because they sensed a great array being formed in Tai Yin. After having a look from the outside, Cheng Qian asks, “Second Brother, what do you think?”

Li Yun makes no definite statement. He just says, “Tough. The Celestial Divination Bureau really throws everything they have into this.”

Yan Zhengming presses, “Can this array be destroyed? Just say yes or no.”

Heart full of worry, Li Yun doesn’t bother to reply. He makes a small sign with his fingers. As if there were an invisible stick moving according to his direction, the map of Tai Yin area is drawn on the ground.

“They’ve made such a big array over a large area here to capture Han Yuan. It takes heaps of resources to run something like this. The usual way is to base it on a lot of humans, or a powerful divine artifact,” Li Yun says, “The former method isn’t very practical. Demonic cultivators are very impulsive, but they’re not unobservant. When a large crowd gathers to operate an

array, anyone with eyes can break it.”

“There are two approaches to breaking an array: by skill or by force. That means you either have to be able to identify the ‘eye’ of the array then destroy it, or use raw strength to overpower the array. Given how much resources the Celestial Divination Bureau has been mobilizing, they must be very well-prepared. It doesn’t seem feasible to rely on brute force,” Li Yun sighs. Erasing the map on the ground, he continues, “Do you remember the array Han Yuan created near Fuyao Mountain a while ago? For some reason, he seems to be doing lots of research on this topic. He likely knows about it as much as I do. If he is snared by the Demon Execution Array, it should be expected that he will try to calculate the ‘eye’ of the array. The Celestial Divination Bureau undoubtedly will have prepared for that.”

Cheng Qian says, “You’re getting long-winded. In the end, you don’t know how to break this array, do you?”

“...It’s not that,” Li Yun says with some hesitation. “The issue is this method carries some risk. Han Yuan has transformed into a demonic dragon. We happen to have a True Dragon Flag in our possession. If we...”

“It’s only us,” Yan Zhengming cuts in, “It’s no place for someone who has not formed a primordial spirit like you.”

...The Sect Leader and senior brother is such an asshole.

“‘You guys’, then! Are you happy now?!” Being hit in a sore spot, Li Yun angrily says, “What’s so great about having a primordial spirit? Something like this Demon Execution Array uses the spiritual energy of Heaven and Earth. You’re not a match for it even if you have ten primordial spirits! What are you being so full of yourself for?!”

Puddle furtively pokes at Cheng Qian. He has no other choice but to step up without hesitation and interrupt the squabble between his senior brothers. “Fine, what’s the relation between a demonic dragon and the True Dragon Flag? Most senior brother, you should talk less if you don’t know anything about this.”

Yan Zhengming glares at Cheng Qian, but he quickly has to turn his gaze away. For whatever reason, Cheng Qian finally remembered to change his tattered old robe, which was barely more than a cleaning rag. Even if Cheng

Qian's new robe is just black like ink with no sense of fashion, which looks obviously cheap, Yan Zhengming still finds him very easy on the eyes.

The robe makes Cheng Qian's features more defined. With Shuang Ren by his side, he seems even sharper and more formidable. However, when there is a shadow of a smile on his face, he is as precious as a jewel.

Yan Zhengming can't resist looking at Cheng Qian again and again, rueing that he can't permanently edge every detail into his mind. Then maintaining a most honourable face of a righteous person, he looks away as if nothing happens. While still excitedly recalling the image over and over again in his head, he listens to Li Yun discussing the serious matter at hand.

"There is a dragon spine and dragon soul inside the True Dragon Flag," Li Yun says, "As a demonic dragon, Han Yuan still lacks a dragon spine, doesn't he? With his cultivation level, he can really make use of the True Dragon Flag and acquire the power of the ancient divine dragon. Then he will have the sufficient power to deal with the Demon Execution Array. The issue is..."

The others all understand what he is about to say.

It's one thing to steal someone from the Celestial Divination Bureau. It's quite another to give a dragon spine and assist someone with as much blood on his hands as Han Yuan to do more evil deeds.

Even without the Oath with the Demon Vanquishing Seal, that is definitely not something they can do.

“We shall not discuss this topic again,” Yan Zhengming says, “Li Yun, put away your True Dragon Flag. You must not take it out. Now that we're done with observing that Demon Execution Array, let's go visit Fuyao Mountain since it's on our way.”

As he turns away, Yan Zhengming sees that Cheng Qian's collar is untidy. Unable to help himself, Yan Zhengming reaches out and adjusts it.

Cheng Qian is frozen in the middle of making a step. He instinctively holds his breath.

As Yan Zhengming looks up, he meets Cheng Qian's eyes, which are deeper than usual. He is startled to realise that he has been too intimate. He immediately withdraws his hands as cold sweat breaks out on his palms.

Clearing his throat, he says, “Didn’t you see that your robe was askew? Pay some attention to your attire, won’t you?”

Cheng Qian keeps his silence, feeling that he can never meet his most senior brother’s standards for this issue.

In this very short trip, Yan Zhengming is ashamed with himself, Cheng Qian silently reviews how he lives, while Li Yun, after being humiliated by his most senior brother, has taken the challenge and transformed into a relentless motormouth which broadcasts the wonders of Fuyao Mountain to his new disciple nephew Nian Dada, which is light in substance and heavy in showing-off.

Li Yun’s extraordinary motormouthing successfully spurs Puddle and Cheng Qian to run faster and faster. As a result, they arrive at their original home Fuyao Mountain in the blink of an eye.

Puddle, who has been flying in the front, suddenly changes back into her human form in the air without any warning. She looks at a spot on the mountain with an unhappy expression, “Senior Brother, seems like there is black demonic energy at the base of the mountain?”

Startled, Cheng Qian immediately flies next to her like a black wind. “Is that Han Yuan?”

Below them is a thick screen of cloud and fog together with the thick greenery, which blocks their vision. Puddle shakes her head. “Likely not. The bloody scent isn’t as thick, but this energy is very polluted. Moreover...”

Before she finishes talking, Cheng Qian already descends.

Whether it’s demonic or normal cultivation, the more powerful the cultivator is, the more visible the aura if the cultivator doesn’t intentionally hide it. These demonic cultivators’ aura can be seen from the sky, so they are not small fry. It is pretty reckless of Cheng Qian to charge down directly like that.

Fuyao Mountain is forever his sensitive spot.

Puddle hastily says, “Third Brother, wait...”

She wants to chase after him but her arm is suddenly pulled back. Yan Zhengming drags her behind him and tells her, “Don’t follow me. Hide somewhere far enough from here.”

Before Puddle can react, Yan Zhengming disappears in a second.

Cheng Qian is angry, but not overly so. He already hides all of his aura as soon as he lands. Light as a feather, he hides in a great tree, then flies up to the thick canopy of the trees without disturbing a single leaf.

What he sees makes him frown. There are two men and a woman. That woman dresses in a very eccentric manner. Had it not been for the fact that she doesn’t carry any yao aura, one might think that she is one. Her hair is decorated by a large morning glory, while her private parts are covered with flower petals. Her bare limbs are full of bracelets made from vines.

Between the two men, one of them is sketching an array on the ground, while the other one, having found a table and chair from somewhere, is leisurely drinking tea.

The woman dressed in flowers says flirtatiously, “Both Xiaoxiang-jun and I don’t know much about arrays. Lu-dage, we all rely on you.”

Hearing that, the one that is sketching the array hastily replies with flattery, “I dare not claim that. I’m just a lowly one who accompanies you two seniors. I only dare to take what you don’t care for. If one day Xiaoxiang-jun claims the Lord Beiming title and lets me be his servant, I will even face death.”

Xiaoxiang-jun, who is drinking tea, gives a smile without warmth. “As long as you know that.”

The one who is creating the array respectfully bows his head. The flower woman laughs heartily, “Lu-dage, you certainly have a silver tongue. Hey, this Fuyao Sect sure is shady, aren’t they? They are apparently a sect of the “pure” cultivation, but great demonic cultivators of several generations come from them. Rumour has it the previous Lord Beiming was originally from this place. Is that true?”

Xiaoxiang-jun smirks, “I don’t know the affairs of the previous generation that well, but how can that Han guy manage to cultivate and transform into

a demonic dragon, then claim to be the Lord of All Demons? There must be some powerful artifact around here.”

The flower woman seductively walks up to Xiaoxiang-jun, then sits in his lap. Wrapping her arms around the man’s neck, she says delicately, “When we manage to use that Han guy’s array to break the seal on Fuyao Mountain and discover how he transformed into a demonic dragon, let’s wait here and watch the fight between him and the dogs of the Celestial Divination Bureau. We’ll have an advantage when both sides take damage. When you claim the realm and glory, please don’t forget me.”

From high above, Cheng Qian already realises that the array that is being formed is copied from Han Yuan’s work back then. Even if he knows for certain that there is no way to get to Fuyao Mountain besides solving the seal, he is furious.

However, a hand from behind grabs his shoulder, as if to stop him from acting recklessly.

Closing his eyes, Cheng Qian speaks through his spiritual awareness, “These three want to take advantage of the battle between the Celestial Divination Bureau and the demonic dragon to be up to no good. Their

cultivation is pretty good. Don't underestimate them. They can surprise us and cause big trouble."

Yan Zhengming falls silent after hearing the explanation from Cheng Qian, then replies, "Kill them."

Right away, Yan Zhengming takes the lead himself and disappears like an illusion. Like an unsheathed sword, he charges at Xiaoxiang-jun, who seems to be the most powerful in the group.

Xiaoxiang-jun angrily shouts, "Who's there?!"

Yan Zhengming says, "The one who'll take your life."

Within the time of that exchange, the two sides become close enough to face each other. Xiaoxiang-jun spits into the air. A thick barrier appears out of nowhere, emitting a strange black aura. Looking visibly scared, the demonic cultivator who has been making the array hastily finds a place to hide.

Xiaoxiang-jun flies behind the barrier. Before he can breathe out in relief, there is a loud explosion. The barrier has been crushed with just a strike. It's unclear what kind of sword his enemy is using. The blade of the sword is shrouded in an indescribable sword energy, which seems harmless at first glance but proves to be terrifying once one gets close to it.

In a panic, Xiaoxiang-jun spreads his arms. The sleeves billow in two gusts of pitch black energy. In a second, he seems much more ferocious. Wrapped in that black energy, he shouts, "You seem tired of living. Let me gift you some death energy. Fuck off to your ancestors!"

Any plant or animal touched by the black energy immediately dies and withers on the spot. Such is the death energy that emits from his palms!

Xiaoxiang-jun raises his hands. The death energy from both sides crash onto Yan Zhengming, attacking the protective energy barrier.

The energy of the protective barrier is visibly consumed by the death energy, then transforms into the death energy itself and becomes a part of the black cloud. Because Yan Zhengming has an immense spiritual energy reserve, the death energy quickly becomes more powerful after a short while.

At that moment, Li Yun's voice comes from above, "It's the technique to switch up yin and yang. It will consume all spiritual energy and life force, only sword energy can't..."

Before he can finish, dozens of blades formed from primordial spirit sweep out like an angry whirlwind. It isn't until then that Xiaoxiang-jun can see clearly the sword in Yan Zhengming's hand. It's a wooden sword without a blade!

Xiaoxiang-jun's face pales, as Yan Zhengming withdraws all of his protective barrier. The death energy is ripped apart in the air by the sword aura before it can reach him, while the blades formed from primordial spirit don't slow down at all. Buzzing in the air, they charge directly at Xiaoxiang-jun.

One of the blades runs through Yan Zhengming. Li Yun calls out again, "Be careful!"

Right after that, 'Xiaoxiang-jun' transforms into a skeleton on the spot, the black eyes of which staring fixedly at Yan Zhengming. It turns out that it's a dummy.

Countless Xiaoxiang-juns appear around Yan Zhengming, who are all pierced by the primordial spirit blades. In just a short while, Yan Zhengming is surrounded by skeletons. The fight suddenly becomes even.

About the woman dressed in flowers, she reacts very quickly. As soon as Yan Zhengming's sword energy appeared, she decisively let Xiaoxiang-jun take the front line and made her escape, her flower petal-studded forehead frowning, "A sword cultivator?"

To an extent, demonic cultivators fear sword cultivators the most. Those cultivators are born with a killing aura. Besides the demon of the heart, no poison or trick can get into them. Seeing that the situation has gone downhill, the woman dressed in flowers immediately tries to escape. At that moment, a chilly sword will fall over her. Someone says from behind, "Trying to run?"

The woman dressed in flowers looks back. She is startled at first, but immediately smiles. Her face like a blooming flower, she hides her lips behind her hand and says, "Oh, where are you from, handsome?"

Her words are spoken with a seductive voice. Even if the other person has a higher cultivation level than she, they would be stunned a little, even if their mind isn't completely controlled. Seeing that, Li Yun wants to warn Cheng Qian, but before he can say anything, Cheng Qian already attacks.

Completely at a loss for words for a moment, Li Yun bursts out laughing, "Wow, Xiao-Qian. Puddle, this is an exceptional quality of your Third Brother. His mind is so firm that he can never be swayed by surface tricks like beauty. You should try to learn from him."

Puddle annoyedly glances at him. "What do I need to learn? I'm not swayed by beauty either, because I am beauty myself."

Li Yun complains, "By the Heavens above, try to keep some of your dignity, won't you."

Not heeding Puddle's reaction, he says aloud, "Xiao-Qian, concentrate and seal your energy. This woman is pretty but shady. She is definitely well trained in seduction techniques. Be careful of her poisonous aura."

Within the time Li Yun says that line, Cheng Qian's sword energy already forms an icy cloud, which freezes all seductive aura into ice. In his hand, the moves of Fuyao Wooden Sword are even more brutal than Sea Tide Sword. In just a couple of moves, he already cuts off an arm of that perfumed skeleton.

The woman dressed in flowers lets out a painful scream. Unfortunately, whether it's Xiaoxiang-jun, who is being driven into a corner by Yan Zhengming, or the creator of the array who has disappeared, no one pays attention to her. These people do not even share an origin. At the slightest sign of trouble, they all turn their back at each other.

Fog seeps out from her wounds. Keeping Li Yun's words in mind, Cheng Qian leaves her no chance to do any trick. He plans to quickly freeze her and finish her off in one move.

Having none of her earlier seductive acts, the woman dressed in flowers avoids the attacks while glaring at Cheng Qian as if wishing to rip him apart and devour him. Suddenly, she lets out an inhuman screech. Without any warning, her remaining arm falls from her body. Blood sprays high into the air from her body. Two flowers bloom from the empty shoulders. They

quickly cover the wounds then fall onto the ground and transform into a field of flowers.

The flower field quickly absorbs her detached limbs and blood, then gives off a thick screen of fog.

Nian Dada wants to take a peek from the air, but Li Yun pulls him back.

“Be careful,” Li Yun says, “Your Master can look at it, but not you. This woman’s going all or nothing. That flower field feeds on the blood and flesh of its host. You don’t even need to breathe the air in. Just a look can give you illusions.”

Nian Dada asks, “Really? Then what does my Master have to do?”

Li Yun says, “Well, this plays into his hand too. His body is made of Spirit Collecting Jade. These tricks have only limited effects on him.”

Before he finishes talking, the flowers in the field all fall down, as a blizzard pours from the sky and sweeps away all pollen. Dressed in all black, Cheng Qian appears with an apathetic face. However, an unnaturally beautiful peach blossom lingers on his shoulder.

The woman dressed in flowers, who is no longer quite human, looks at him with twisting expressions. However, as she sees the peach blossom on Cheng Qian's shoulder, she suddenly bursts out laughing. "Hahaha, your body is no longer of mortal flesh and blood, yet you still have romantic entanglement? You so-called righteous cultivators are all hypocrites..."

These words stun quite a few people in the area.

Cheng Qian strikes her at the waist before she can end her speech. At that moment, from the direction of Tai Yin Mountain, there is the sound of a loud explosion mixed with a pandemonium of whirlwind, great birds' screeching, horses' neighing, wild beasts' howling, great waves crashing, which shake the heaven and earth.

Li Yun's face pales. "Most senior brother, wrap things up quickly! The Demon's Execution Array has been activated!"

Before Yan Zhengming can reply, the array creator who had been hiding in a corner suddenly appears. A twisted smile breaks out on his face. “Wrap things up quickly?”

He raises his hand. The array on the ground suddenly twists and transforms. Xiaoxiang-jun, who was struck in the chest by Yan Zhengming and painfully fell onto the ground, says with a mixture of fear and anger. “Lu Qiuping, what are you plotting?!”

The array creator Lu Qiuping already takes over in the array ‘eye’. “That array of Han Yuan is just a useless one for listening to the mountain, but you’re still holding onto the illusion of using it to acquire Fuyao Mountain? How laughable! Hand over the Xiaoxiang-jun token. Today I’ll show you what ‘the oriole stalking the mantis’ is like.”

These demonic cultivators choose this life or death moment to turn on each other!

Everyone is shaken because the Demon Execution Array is activated earlier than expected. Cheng Qian alone isn’t distracted. Ignoring everything else, he slashes the demonic woman in half.

Being cut into two at the waist, the flower woman falls into the ground, her blood gushing out in a stream. All flowers on her wilt and fall apart, as her face becomes sagged and sallow within seconds. Poison filling her eyes, she says, “Let me gift you some cursed peach blossoms.”

As soon as she finishes, her corpse explodes. Already having his guard up, Cheng Qian uses Shuang Ren to form an ice shield around him. The blood of the woman clings onto the blade of Shuang Ren and blooms into countless peach blossoms, but they are all frozen into trash by the sword of terrible death.

As Cheng Qian shields himself like that, part of the peach blossoms formed from the flower woman’s suicide attack flies to one side directly into Lu Qiuping’s array.

Being thus surprised, Lu Qiuping lets out a painful cry as he hides his face behind his arms. Suddenly red smoke flies up from the array and wraps over his body. In a blink of the eye, he is turned into a pink skeleton.

As the situation changes so suddenly, everyone can’t do anything other than stand and look.

Right after that, something strange happens. A white light full of killing aura flies in from the direction of Tai Yin Mountain. The Demon Execution Array has been aggressively expanded. Accordingly, everyone here has fallen in the zone of the array.

As the killing aura gets in the array of Lu Qiuping, it is tainted by the cursed peach blossoms. The white light, the demonic energy, and the red smoke blend together and fly everywhere.

This must be the most complicated array in the world.

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Under Tai Yin Mountain, the shadow of the raging demonic dragon can be seen. Wishing to wrap the matter with the demonic cultivators quickly, Yan Zhengming takes advantage of the moment when Xiaoxiang-jun is still stunned, and correctly finds out where his true body is among the skeletons. Without any mercy, Yan Zhengming slices him in two with just one strike.

The cursed peach blossoms, which reek of blood, quickly spread around.

Yan Zhengming shouts, “Let’s go!”

As if to sate his anger, Yan Zhengming grabs Cheng Qian’s shoulder and drags him along as he rides on the sword, then asks through gritted teeth, “Romantic entanglement?”

For the first time, Cheng Qian avoids Yan Zhengming’s eyes. He says in a low voice, “Senior brother, I’m sorry.”

He puts so many things that need to be said in those few words, but no one gets it. Yan Zhengming doesn’t understand what Cheng Qian apologizes for.

Hearing that, his anger just gets even more heated. The demon of the heart that was asleep for a while begins to rear its head again.

Yan Zhengming takes a deep breath and annoyedly recites the Scripture of Serenity in his head until the lines become like a lullaby. As his anxious heart reluctantly calms down, the fire of rage is replaced by cold ash. Yan Zhengming suddenly loses all of his earlier passion.

Without even looking back, he releases Cheng Qian. “I’ll deal with you when we’re back. Follow me!”

The group glide across the sky like a rainbow and arrive at the destination within seconds, while the red-tinged curse still pursues them from behind. Looking back, Li Yun cautiously says, “Looks like that array maker wanted to borrow the energy of the Demon Execution Array to start his own array, then things ended up like this. These cursed peach blossoms have been merged with the Demon Execution Array. There is no telling what will happen. I’m afraid it’ll be tricky for us.”

Yan Zhengming’s face is like a block of ice. “You think no one else recognizes that? Would it kill you to show off a bit less?”

Li Yun glances at his seething senior brother. He knows right away that he is just collateral damage for Yan Zhengming's temper. As a true hero knows how to adapt to the circumstances, Li Yun doesn't argue back.

It doesn't take them long to get to their destination, but something unexpected has happened under Tai Yin Mountain.

Han Yuan has entered the Demon Execution Array, but the killing aura of the array is even worse than that of the demonic dragon's.

In the array, countless blades of spiritual energy fly from all directions. Even a stray fallen leaf became like an ice knife. Someone inside the area of the array are attacked from any direction and become a meat skewer. Even flying in the air would be no help.

Li Yun frowns. "This is wrong. This array has been changed!"

Yan Zhengming asks, "What?"

“The Demon Execution Array has an extremely strong killing aura. It destroys whoever stands in its way, regardless of good or evil. To protect their own people, usually the side that mobilizes this array will leave an exception, such that the array will only attack what has demonic energy and leave purified energy alone,” Li Yun says in a rush, “But the one here obviously comes after allies and enemies alike!”

As soon as he says that, a person dressed in the black uniform of the Celestial Divination Bureau runs like mad in their direction. Completely without any means to defend himself, that cultivator is as pitiful as a rabbit being pursued by an eagle. In a blink of the eye, a blade appears right in front of him without warning. Unable to react in time, the cultivator runs into the blade and gets run through in the chest, and then the wound splits wider until his body is torn into pieces.

Yan Zhengming is unable to find a fitting response to the situation. What kind of luck they have that after running into a bunch of demonic cultivators who turned against each other, they stumble upon a betrayal within the Celestial Divination Bureau?!

Now they have to deal with an unpredictable Demon Execution Array while being persistently pursued by the cursed peach blossoms.

To top it off, Cheng Qian has not been acting like himself!

Li Yun already spots a thrashing demonic dragon in the Demon Execution Array, “Most senior brother...”

“Let’s break this,” Yan Zhengming says without any emotion, “In the present, whether it’s the schemers or the marks, everyone is all stuck in here. It’s likely we’ll all die here if we don’t destroy this array.”

Terrified by the dark red glint in Yan Zhengming’s eyes, Li Yun shakily reminds him, “I think you should look after yourself first.”

Yan Zhengming ignores that. He is determined to break this array. No way he’d let this damned thing trap and kill him here.

He thinks to himself, “I must find out who the person in Cheng Qian’s heart is.”

He stretches out his arms and shouts a command. As he turns his palms up, a small wooden sword appears between them, which keeps getting bigger. Then with a white flash, the sword becomes a full-sized weapon.

As soon as this wooden sword appears. Cheng Qian gets a strange feeling. Though it doesn't really affect him much, he can sense a link between him and that sword.

An earth-shatteringly powerful ray of sword energy strikes down like lightning. The strike shakes up the outer area of the Demon Execution Array and reveals its boundary with a loud explosion.

The demonic dragon suddenly raises his head.

The Demon Execution Array madly strikes back at the sword energy. Countless blades rain from the sky together with black clouds and target Yan Zhengming's sword.

The weapons clash together with a loud screech that seemingly could tear people's ears. Sparks fly and explode everywhere like fireworks, which

lights up the dark late evening sky like a sun.

Pain surges in Yan Zhengming's chest. The veins on his hands spasm, as blood is nearly squeezed out of his heart.

However, at the moment, he feels a gust of energy that doesn't belong to him seeping into his body from the sword formed of primordial spirit in his hands. Starting from his hands, the energy gently soothes his damaged meridians.

At the same time, a thin layer of frost appears on the wooden sword.

Yan Zhengming: "..."

What the heck is in this unprecedented sword, which was made from primordial spirit?

Yan Zhengming's anger is close to driving him mad. How many things has that little brat been hiding from him?!

Meanwhile, in that life or death moment, the persistent cursed peach blossoms have caught up to them.

Like a drop of water falling into a frying pan full of hot oil, the cursed peach blossoms explode with a sizzling sound as they fall into the Demon Execution Array.

The cursed peach blossoms swarm the Demon Execution Array in the blink of the eye, filling everywhere with a thick fragrance. Everyone can smell a threat from that scent.

A demonic cultivator has his spiritual energy shield breached by the cursed peach blossoms. His expression turns dreamy, like he is lost in a mysterious sensation. He flies increasingly slowly then drops from the sky without any warning. His flesh and blood have all been sucked dry, making him a happy shrivelled corpse.

Right after that, the demonic dragon lets out a howl that echoes through the sky, then charges at the border of the Demon Execution Array that has been revealed by Yan Zhengming's attack. The dragon's giant body thrashes angrily at the line.

Both Heaven and Earth shake as if mountains and rivers would be broken up. More than half of the Demon Execution Array's firepower targets Han Yuan. Countless gleaming blades from all directions relentlessly slashes the demonic dragon.

The dragon screeches, his eyes glaring as his body is quickly filled with wounds. However, he doesn't pause a beat, but instead turns his body and fearlessly charges at the border of the array.

Li Yun can't help himself. He rummages in his item pouch, as the thought of taking out the True Dragon Flag overrides his heart. He holds the Dragon Flag, his hands trembling.

A hand grips his elbow. Startled, Li Yun lets the True Dragon Flag fall from his hand, but the person already catches it.

"Second Brother, don't do that. If this thing falls in the demonic dragon's hand, you'll go down in history as someone who commits an unforgivable sin," With the True Dragon Flag in his hand, Cheng Qian says softly to Li Yun. "Please watch over Puddle and Nian Dada. I'll find a way to detect the 'eye' of the array."

Li Yun is shaken. “You...”

Cheng Qian rolls up the True Dragon Flag and puts it in his sleeve, then flies down the Tai Yin Mountain like an arrow.

As soon as he enters, countless blades from the Demon Execution Array appear to block his path. Shuang Ren gleams like fire in his hand as Cheng Qian forges a path in between the sea of blades. The weapons frozen by frost from the air to the ground on his trail are like a chilly white silk sash.

The spiritual energy swirls like a storm throughout Cheng Qian’s body, which affects all of his senses. If Li Yun is right that the it is impossible to use manpower to run such a large Demon Execution Array and that the ‘eye’ of the array has to be a divine artifact, Cheng Qian, who is much more sensitive to such artifacts because of his Spirit Collection Jade body, should take his chances even if it isn’t guaranteed he will find that ‘eye’.

Suddenly, someone blocks his way. Without thinking, Cheng Qian attacks. The two gusts of sword energy clash with each other, causing the newcomer to be nearly thrown to one side. That person hastily speaks up. “Senior, please stop!”

That is You Liang.

Cheng Qian of course knows who he is, but doesn't bother to hold back. He has had a grudge against these nosy Celestial Divination Bureau goons for a long time, so he plans to kill all of those that stand in his way without caring who that is.

His second strike follows without any mercy in the blink of an eye. The sword energy of Shuang Ren leaves in its trail a huge white circle. You Liang dares not directly counter it. He hastily moves to one side out of the way. "Senior, please wait! I know where the 'eye' of the array is!"

Glancing at him, Cheng Qian replies with a harsh smile. "I've never trusted dogs of the Celestial Divination Bureau."

"Senior Cheng!" You Liang's eyes are red. "There are thirty thousand local troops of the Tai Yin area here, not to mention hundreds of my sect's members. Even if my honor is less than an animal, how can I stand watching them die here?!"

Cheng Qian pauses. After a few seconds, he glances at the young sword cultivator, who is close to tears, and says, “Lead the way.”

Having said that, Cheng Qian points his finger in the air. A blinding ray of white light flies from his hand directly into the sky and explodes into a cloud of snow, which attracts the attention of everyone. Even the demonic dragon, who has been bashing the Demon Execution Array, turns back into human form. Wiping the blood on his lips, he looks in Cheng Qian’s direction with an apathetic expression.

Knowing that the mission to capture the demonic dragon in Tai Yin has failed, You Liang grits his teeth and says recklessly, “Follow me.”

Then he swings his sword and opens a narrow path. Risking everything, he takes Cheng Qian to a spot under Tai Yin Mountain.

Some corpses are hung on a great tree at that place. You Liang talks without looking back, “It’s them who meddled with the Demon Execution Array. I dealt with them, but the array had already started and couldn’t be stopped. Senior, please have a look.”

There is a huge typhoon under Tai Yin mountain. It swirls like currents in the great sea, hiding countless sharp blades inside. Even a sword cultivator who has formed his primordial spirit like You Liang shakes when facing its killing aura from afar.

Cheng Qian pulls a short sabre from a corpse. He can tell it's a good blade just by touching. The spells carved on its hilt are well-made too, which shows that it was made by an artisan of some major sect or family.

He weighs the blade in his hand and imbues it with his spiritual energy, then pushes it into the typhoon. The blade flies off with the power of a storm. However, in just a second, a fearsome clang can be heard, as the protective spells around the sabre dissolve like dust and the blade becomes pieces of junk.

Even steel ends up like that. How can a mortal body survive?

Cheng Qian frowns and turns his hands. Frost gathers around his body as a sphere of spiritual energy expands under his hands.

Yan Zhengming arrives at that moment. Seeing what is going on, he immediately rushes ahead and raises his hand to force the spiritual energy back in, shouting, “Withdraw it!”

Seeing that the spiritual energy full of aggression is about to clash with Yan Zhengming’s hand, Cheng Qian hastily pulls it back into his sleeves. Yan Zhengming’s hand comes down and stops just short of Cheng Qian’s face, as if about to give him a slap.

Cheng Qian stays on the spot without moving, thinking, “If he really hits me, I’ll probably feel relieved.”

However, Yan Zhengming, after several expressions go through his face, still puts down his hand. He says harshly, “How dare you test the ‘eye’ of the Demon Execution Array like that?!”

Cheng Qian says nothing. At first glance, it looks like he is silently rebelling, so Yan Zhengming gets even angrier.

A harsh laugh comes from not far away. No one notices Han Yuan too has arrived. Without regard for anyone, he raises his hand and fires out a gust of

aggressive demonic energy.

The demonic energy in the air transforms into a black dragon. The dragon rears its head and swallows all of the surrounding cursed peach blossoms, then arrogantly charges at the typhoon.

The ground shakes. As the ‘eye’ of the array seems to be provoked, the typhoon suddenly doubles in size. Heaven and Earth darken, as even the wind and the dust become sharp as blades. The black dragon suffers countless cuts. You Liang is nearly pulled in, while big and small cracks appear in the protective spiritual energy around everyone, forcing them to fall back.

Yan Zhengming yells, “Are you crazy?!”

Before he finishes talking, the black dragon created from demonic dragon lets out a blood curdling screech and dissolves!

Han Yuan’s face pales as he wobbles. He has obviously sustained a serious injury. Yet even in that state, he still insists on pretending like nothing

happened, and gives You Liang a condescending smile. “Your esteemed sect’s flair for internal conflict is indeed unparalleled. Today I’ve learnt a lot from you people.”

Cheng Qian touches the True Dragon Flag in his sleeve and suddenly says in a low voice, “Maybe I can give a try.”

Yan Zhengming angrily glares at him. As Cheng Qian reveals a bit of the True Dragon Flag and quickly glances in Han Yuan’s direction, Yan Zhengming is surprised at first, but he quickly gets the idea.

After exchanging that glance, they immediately make their move.

Cheng Qian deploys the True Dragon Flag. He isn’t like that piece of junk Bian Xiaohui. As his immense spiritual energy reserve pours into the dragon flag, the soul of the ancient divine dragon lets out a loud roar and flies out. It gives off a blazing light, as if it’s become alive again.

As it turns out, they managed to win the True Dragon Flag not because the ancient dragon soul was weak, but because Bian Xiaohui was a terrible user

for it, so the flag's power was severely restricted. All it had was the primordial spirit lingering in the flag to support the dragon. Nevertheless, it could still bully quite a few powerful cultivators.

This time, it's Cheng Qian who uses this dragon flag.

Initially Han Yuan was surprised, but then upon realizing what the artifact is, his face turns into a mad delight. As he makes his move, Yan Zhengming, who is already prepared, immediately strikes at him.

Han Yuan is forced to fight, but he was already injured by the Demon Execution Array. Not having enough strength left, he is cornered by Yan Zhengming's attack.

As the divine dragon appears, the Demon Execution Array is even more agitated. Cheng Qian puts away Shuang Ren. As he holds the dragon spine in his hand, it transforms into a lance. He flies up and relies on the divine dragon's protection to enter the earth-shattering center of the Demon Execution Array.

Even if the divine dragon is in front of him, the killing aura that smashes in his face still makes Cheng Qian feel like his chest is being crushed, as the spiritual energy that protects his body shatters. He holds the lance from the dragon spine in his hands and draws a circle in front of his chest. The divine dragon immediately curls around him.

The golden light around the dragon soul immediately dims.

Cheng Qian has to make a push and concentrates all of his spiritual energy into the True Dragon Flag.

That moment is like when he rushed in and carved a spell without caring if he could handle it in his childhood. When he stands up, pains flare up all over his body like being pierced by needles, as his energy reservoir has nearly dried up and his meridians can't take it anymore. The dragon soul is ablaze once again, as the divine dragon opens its mouth and spits out a pair of golden dragon pearls.

As if being sentient, the seemingly useless dragon pearls fly out and open a narrow path in the typhoon. Thanks to that, Cheng Qian can see the 'eye' of the array, where something is shining.

Lack of courage has never been Cheng Qian's problem. Being the kind of person who must get to his target even if he must crawl, he ignores how his spiritual energy is getting low, such that he can't even ride his sword, and jumps on the dragon's back. He keeps his body low and charges into the gleaming storm of blades.

Cheng Qian's back is quickly filled with wounds big and small, as if he is a fish on the cutting board. The divine dragon lets out an angry roar and directly follows the dragon pearls to the center, where the 'eye' of the array is.

Feeling that he is already at his limit, Cheng Qian doesn't bother to see what artifact the 'eye' of the array is. He tosses it in the air with the lance and catches it with his hand.

As soon as he catches it, his palm burns with indescribable pain. Cheng Qian can't help himself and lets out a groan.

The 'eye' of the array has been moved from its position.

With a loud explosion, the sea of sharp blades suddenly changes direction and flies to the sky with increasing speed. Then there is a loud crash at the border of the Demon Execution Array as it collapses.

Countless pits of all sizes explode in the ground. The demonic cultivators and forces of the Celestial Divination Bureau, who have been stuck in the array, no longer bother to fight each other. They all look relieved to escape this tribulation.

At that moment, the divine dragon slowly descends.

Having no strength left, Cheng Qian falls down from the dragon.

Ignoring Han Yuan, Yan Zhengming rushes to catch Cheng Qian. Before he can check Cheng Qian's injuries, the cursed peach blossoms fall around them into the ground and transform into an endless field of beautiful but threatening pink flowers.

With a cold sneer, Han Yuan waves his hand and sends out a sphere of infernal fire. The fire burns the field of flowers into black ash, sending thick

smoke full of cursed energy into the sky.

However, an unexpected event which stuns everyone happens right that moment.

As if the thick smoke has stirred up something, lightning strikes from the sky, then a loud explosion echoes from all directions. Suddenly, a crack appears in the middle of the sky where the many demon-execution blades were just a while ago.

The crack, which spans from the sky to the ground, increasingly widens, as if to tear apart the whole area. Everything, whether living or not, is swallowed into it.

In the blink of an eye, Yan Zhengming and Cheng Qian as well as the True Dragon Flag disappear on the spot.

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Liu Yao - Chapter 84

When Cheng Qian regains his consciousness, he sees that he is surrounded by darkness, as if the light in the sky were extinguished.

His first sensation is pain. Then it's the cold.

In theory, he once lived by an ice lake for fifty years. Every bone in his body has been forged by the ice lake, so he no longer had the sensation of 'cold' for quite a while. However, this place is eerie.

Unlike the usual cold of winter, the cold of this place is subtle but persistent. It seeps into one's bones, as if to draw out one's lifeforce.

It's the gentlest killing aura, one that even a body made of rock cannot resist.

When in this place, a person would feel their body become heavy. With just a dip in alertness, they would be pulled down by that sensation of fatigue and listlessness.

Cheng Qian frowns. Where the heck is this place?

Shuang Ren is still by his side. Cheng Qian wriggles his frozen fingers and realizes that the lance already transformed back into the dragon spine. The dragon soul too returned to the True Dragon Flag, which he is holding tightly in his hand.

Seeing that he still has the two most important things, he feels somewhat assured.

Cheng Qian uses his arms to support himself as he rises up, but a terrible burning sensation surges in his palm. It isn't until this point that he remembers he caught the 'eye' of the Demon Execution Array with his hand.

However, when he raises his hand to have a look, there is no sign of gruesome burn and injury like he imagined. There isn't even a small scratch.

This is really strange.

Cheng Qian recites a spell. White light flares from his palm. A crest with a curved shape, which looks like an ear upon a closer look, appears then goes away in the blink of an eye.

Besides the lingering sensation of burn and the strange crest, there is nothing abnormal. Cheng Qian has to put it aside for the time being.

As soon as he moves, the countless wounds on his back immediately burst. He lets out a soft groan and tries to sit up to heal himself, planning to settle this injury first before thinking of anything else.

At that moment, Cheng Qian hears Yan Zhengming's voice.

"You must not touch your spiritual energy," Yan Zhengming is sitting a good distance from him. His voice is a bit hoarse. "If I get it correctly, we are at the bottom of the Abyss of the Heart Demon, near the Tower of No Regret. Do you have any medicine for external injuries with you?"

"No, I'm no traveller," Cheng Qian uses the dragon spine as support and stands up. "What's going on? Are you alright?"

“I’m fine. Sit where you are. Stop moving around,” Yan Zhengming says, “The power of the Demon Execution Array was too much. We summoned the divine dragon soul to break it. Then that dumbass Han Yuan burnt the cursed peach blossoms. So “heavenly dragon”, “earthly demon”, “humanly desire” were all there, which happened to tear off a piece of the seal over the Tower of No Regret. We two were close by, so we ended up here.”

Cheng Qian: “...”

This must be because they forgot to consult the calendar of fortune before leaving home, so they have had nothing but bad luck.

As if to suppress something, Yan Zhengming takes a deep breath, then exhales slowly but heavily. He says weakly in a small voice, “No need to worry. Our Fuyao Sect has been guarding the Valley of Heart Demon for many generations. I still have the Sect Leader seal with me. It definitely contains the way to get out of here. Don’t recklessly stir up your spiritual energy. Take care of the injuries by yourself first.”

Cheng Qian’s injuries are mostly on his back, so the mortal healing method would be very inconvenient. He moves his shoulders a bit. Seeing that the

injuries aren't to the bones, he considers himself lucky and ignores the matter.

The injuries on his own body don't bother Cheng Qian. On the other hand, he can sense that Yan Zhengming is acting strange. When they were teenagers, he fought with some rogue cultivators and got hit only once in the back with a demon vanquishing baton. After that incident, his most senior brother was gung-ho about personally treating his injuries. This time, after he was just cut up nearly into a pulp by the Demon Execution Array, the tone is 'take care of it yourself'?

Cheng Qian stands up and approaches Yan Zhengming. "Senior brother, what's the matter?"

Yan Zhengming angrily growls, "Don't come here!"

He yells so loudly that his voice is off. Cheng Qian hesitates a little, then he decides to ignore it and strides forward.

Yan Zhengming curls up in a corner that is even darker than the surrounding. Had it not been for a cultivator's sharp sense, it would be

nearly impossible to find him. The darkness is like a veil over Yan Zhengming's features, but the demon of the heart's mark, which faded for a while, has reappeared on his forehead. The stark red of the mark makes it stand out like a beautiful scar.

Astonished, Cheng Qian raises his hand to touch the mark. "This... Are you affected by the Valley of the Heart Demon?"

Having nowhere else to hide, Yan Zhengming has no other choice but closes his eyes and keeps his silence like an old monk immersed in medication. If there weren't the aggressive energy that seems about to bite on his face, one may think he is really that.

As Cheng Qian comes near, Yan Zhengming's eyebrows spasm, as if he is in great pain.

In the end, he can't resist it anymore and seizes Cheng Qian's wrist.

Yan Zhengming's grip is like a steel vise. His palm is so hot that it seems to be burning. The demon of the heart's mark becomes even more vividly red,

like a bloodstain.

Holding Cheng Qian's hand, Yan Zhengming painfully curls into himself. He speaks in a low voice, his tone like a sleep talker, "Don't... Cheng Qian... I beg you..."

Cheng Qian knows what 'demon of the heart' is, but this is the first time he learns that a person can be tormented by their demon of the heart to this extent.

So what on earth is in Yan Zhengming's heart?

Cheng Qian carefully watches Yan Zhengming in silence for a while. Though he feels it's probably not nice to snoop like this, in the present he can't afford such niceties.

He thinks to himself, "Most senior brother, sorry."

Then he gets his spiritual awareness to connect with the primordial spirit piece inside the wooden sword.

The strange sensation of seeing two places at the same time happens again, as Cheng Qian looks at Yan Zhengming's ravaged inner mind through the primordial spirit piece inside the wooden sword. Spiritual energy swirls chaotically everywhere, which also affects the sword energy. Had it not been for the strained protection of the wooden sword, there is no telling what would happen.

The demon of the heart clings like black clouds to Yan Zhengming's primordial spirit, who is in the meditative stance with his eyes closed, and viciously taunts him.

At that moment, Cheng Qian sees the face of the person in that crimson demon of the heart and freezes on the spot.

The person in the heart demon is none other than Cheng Qian himself.

Just a second later, the heart demon that has been swirling like black smoke falls down and takes human form. As if sensing something, that person

looks at the wooden sword with a sarcastic expression, which is familiar yet strange at the same time, then slowly walks towards the sitting form of Yan Zhengming's primordial spirit. The person lightly kneels down and places his head on Yan Zhengming's lap.

Cheng Qian: "..."

This is the first time he sees 'himself' behave in such a flirtatious manner, so he doesn't know how he should react.

In Cheng Qian's guise, the heart demon lifts Yan Zhengming's chin and watches him intently in silence for a moment. Seeing that Yan Zhengming refuses to open his eyes, the heart demon laughs softly and caresses the lips of the meditating primordial spirit with its pale finger, whispering, "Senior Brother, why are you refusing to look at me?"

In the outside world, the fingers of Yan Zhengming, which are still holding onto Cheng Qian's wrists, suddenly squeeze. A cracking sound can be heard.

Cheng Qian withdraws his awareness with some difficulty. His heart feels hollow as he half kneels on the ground.

He stays dazedly in that position for a long while, as his mind traces back every symptom that he witnessed. He recalls his most senior brother's violent reaction in that little library, when he asked that question in ignorance. Unbelievable.

"His demon of the heart is me?" Cheng Qian dazedly thinks, "It can't be."

Yan Zhengming slumps, as blood seeps out from his mouth corner.

Cheng Qian comes back to his senses. He realizes that he can't leave Yan Zhengming in this state.

"Most senior brother," Cheng Qian uses one hand to press Yan Zhengming's shoulder. He says in a soft voice, "Calm your spirit. This is the Valley of the Heart Demon. You must not let it have the chance to cause trouble."

Hearing that, Yan Zhengming opens his eyes and dreamily stares at Cheng Qian with a dazed expression.

Cheng Qian's heart suddenly beats madly.

As if possessed, Cheng Qian asks in a low voice, "Senior Brother, what exactly is your heart demon about?"

For a fleeting moment, he sees that Yan Zhengming's lips move, and the answer is about to come out.

Cold sweats break out on Cheng Qian's back, causing his wounds to be both painful and itchy. In all of his life, he has never experienced so much tension.

In just a split second later, Yan Zhengming's gaze becomes sober again during the struggle. He lets go of Cheng Qian's hand and pushes him away to no avail.

Yan Zhengming can't control his shaking hands after being tormented by the heart demon. His fingers on Cheng Qian's shoulders slide through a sword cut on the arm and get stained by the blood that has not completely dried up. Yan Zhengming hastily takes his hands back. "You..."

Cheng Qian ignores his bleeding shoulders. His eyes become darker than ink as the pain only spurs him on. He knows he shouldn't act like this but he can't resist his boiling passion.

He presses closer to Yan Zhengming. "You know that the more you try to hide, the bigger problem your heart demon becomes. Why can't you tell me? What do you have to hide?"

Yan Zhengming says, "Let go..."

Cheng Qian replies, "Senior brother!"

His eyes red, Yan Zhengming growls, "Cheng Qian, are you trying to usurp..."

He can't finish his line. Cheng Qian suddenly pins him onto the wall, then kisses his still open lips like it's something that must be done at all cost.

That move blocks everything Yan Zhengming is about to say.

Cheng Qian is by nature someone who isn't very knowledgeable about affairs of the heart, much less desires of the body. He also conscientiously stays away from all indecency, such that he dared not even look closely into the fake Scripture of Serenity. His so-called kiss isn't even a kiss, just a faint touch like a dragonfly sliding over the pond. However, it is like an explosion in Yan Zhengming's head that shakes his very soul.

With a gasp, Yan Chengming unconsciously tightens his grips on Cheng Qian's robe.

"Forgive my insolence, senior brother," Cheng Qian is taut like a bowstring, but from the outside, he still looks calm. Using the reckless tone of a doomed man who is beyond all threats, he says, "What are you going to do? Lock me up to make me repent? Execute me according to sect rules? I won't resist, I promise."

Yan Zhengming: “...”

This shock is so great that even the heart demon that has been causing trouble is shaken too.

Having spoken out loud such outrageous, rebellious ideas, Cheng Qian suddenly feels relieved. He doesn't hold back anymore, and holds Yan Zhengming's hands that have been gripping his robe. “In the Demon Execution Array, you asked me who I had romantic entanglements with. Senior brother, I am telling you now. Do you dare to hear it?”

At that moment, inside Yan Zhengming's mind, the heart demon once again takes Cheng Qian's form. Embracing his primordial spirit from behind, the heart demon whispers in his ear, “Senior brother, I will grant you whatever you wish. Do you dare to want me?”

Being attacked from two sides, Yan Zhengming cannot tell which one is the real anymore.

The heart demon in his mind gently caresses his primordial spirit with its fingers and whispers, “Senior brother, I've been focussed on my cultivation

for a hundred years. Even heavenly tribulations couldn't make me waver. Now, all of that is ruined in your hand. Are you happy?"

That line is like a bucket of ice poured right on his head. Mixed with the relentless cold in the Valley of the Heart Demon, those words seep into every part of his body.

His face white as a sheet, Yan Zhengming can't find a reply.

The heart demon takes many tacks. There are times it smiles softly and says, "Senior brother, you've wanted me for a long time. Why are you pretending to be righteous now?" Other times it scolds him coldly, "Sect Leader Yan, how immoral must you be to violate what is under your watch?". It even turns into Cheng Qian in his adolescence with a gaping hole in the chest and mournfully looks at Yan Zhengming, "Senior brother, didn't you tell me not to worry about anything, because you would take care of it?"

"Senior brother..."

Yan Zhengming's body swings between extreme heat and extreme cold. Sweats drench his forehead, as his eyes are red from bloodshot.

Because Cheng Qian didn't expect that his words could have such an effect on his sect leader and senior brother, he is at a loss. Then he notices the mark of the heart demon on Yan Zhengming's forehead, which is so red that it seems about to bleed.

Frowning a little, Cheng Qian once again takes advantage of the piece of primordial spirit on the wooden sword and sends his awareness into Yan Zhengming's mind.

As soon as Cheng Qian gets in, he is shaken to the core. All of the heart demons are taking his form, but wearing different expressions. The thick black energy in the mind gets thicker and thicker, as it hungrily absorbs the spiritual energy and creates even more illusions.

In the beginning, Cheng Qian only feels a bit creeped out. It's natural to feel unsettled to see countless copies of oneself all in one place like this. Then he hears what the heart demons are saying.

Cheng Qian's gaze grows cold, as an unexplainable anger erupts in his heart.

He waves his hand and calls up the wooden sword in Yan Zhengming's mind through the piece of his primordial spirit in it. The wooden sword soars, covered in white frost, and attacks the heart demons, causing them to quickly disperse.

The heart demons run away, but then gather and turn into a thick black cloud, which stubbornly clings onto Yan Zhengming's mind.

Yan Zhengming's spiritual energy swirls around madly. A mouthful of blood rises in his throat, which he unsteadily suppresses.

His mind, being clear for a moment, he resignedly says to Cheng Qian, "Stop causing trouble."

"I'm not causing trouble," Cheng Qian looks at him with blazingly bright eyes, "Most senior brother, as long as I'm not dead, I won't give up."

Yan Zhengming frowns as he searches for words.

Cheng Qian suddenly looks away a little. A faint smile blooms on his face.
“If you kick me out of the sect, it’ll only be more convenient for me.”

Yan Zhengming: “...”

He himself has had similar thoughts, that if he weren’t the sect leader, if he could switch places with Cheng Qian, he would be able to face the inappropriate feelings in his heart without guilt. Even if he were kicked out of the sect, it’d be even better because the taboo no longer applied. And now Cheng Qian unexpectedly speaks out loud those same ideas.

He doesn’t know whether he should laugh or cry at this kind of ‘resonance of minds’ situation.

However, after the initial shock, Yan Zhengming realises that something is not right. Cheng Qian is only truly straight forward when he fights. Otherwise, he is actually the secretive sort who keeps all of his emotions

and thoughts to himself. What he seems to reveal is mostly a farce. Even if he is sincere, it's only in his heart. He would never just go and say it out loud like this.

Especially now, as they fell into the Valley of the Heart Demon and still haven't found a way out.

His mind now fully awakened and back to its usual speed, Yan Zhengming suddenly recalls the strange frost on the wooden sword in the Demon Execution Array. He immediately pushes aside everything and asks forcefully, "What have you found out? Cheng Qian, I ask you once again, what is inside that wooden sword."

Cheng Qian: "..."

If he hadn't seen with his own eyes the form the countless heart demons in Yan Zhengming's mind took, he would think that it was just his delusion.

Yan Zhengming asks, "How did you imbue the wooden sword with the Fuyao sword will?"

Cheng Qian, who has been talking so eloquently, can't find anything to say.

The two of them are in that push and pull state for a while. Feeling at his limit, Yan Zhengming pushes Cheng Qian away and shakily stands up.

Yan Zhengming says, "Well, keep your secret. I don't care how you found out. It's just the demon of the heart. When a sword cultivator enters the 'divine realm' level, they will be haunted by their hearts' demons in every step. So what? I've come this far. Everything is still within my control. You... there is no need for you to pity me."

Cheng Qian is speechless. He suddenly wants to crack open his most senior brother's pretty but useless head to see if the inside has been chewed up into scraps by the heart demon.

Glancing at him, Yan Zhengming takes from his robe a marble seal the size of a thumb. As he closes his hand around the seal, it gives off a soft white light that brightens the gloomy abyss inside the Valley of the Heart Demon. He turns his back to Cheng Qian and assumes a jovial tone. "I won't squabble with you today. Let's go. We'll find a way out..."

Cheng Qian suddenly hugs him from behind. Yan Zhengming's back stiffens. As soon as he is about to yell at Cheng Qian, he hears Cheng Qian says through gritted teeth, "You're a spoiled brat who is only good at preening and causing trouble. Who can be bothered to pity you? I like you! I want you! What else do I have to say?"

Liu Yao - Chapter 85

“Human lives are like dust. They come from nowhere, and scatter aimlessly in the wind.” (1)

Can they expect to escape human affairs just by entering the path of cultivation?

Can they expect everything to go as they wish just because they have the powers to move the world?

Hasn't even a great cultivator who can change weather at a whim like Tong Ru ended up scattered pieces of soul?

What chances would a bunch of ignorant juniors like them have?

Yan Zhengming hasn't had much opportunity to talk to Tong Ru, but he has been holding quite a few opinions regarding his disciple grandfather. From time to time, he can't help but thinking that if Tong Ru hadn't been a busy body and created that so-called Hall of Initiation, he wouldn't have incurred suspicion and been tricked into the Three Lives mystic site.

Even if he had seen what was in the Three Lives mystic site, if he hadn't believed the prediction in such an extreme way, if he had been just a little more accepting of the situation instead of stubbornly insisting to change it, if he had listened to his friends' advice, if he hadn't been so unwilling to settle for his lot in life...

Perhaps Yan Zhengming's Master wouldn't have died and ended up in a dying weasel.

Fuyao Sect too wouldn't have fallen to ruins.

Yan Zhengming and the others would have been like those silly disciples of the White Tiger Estate. They would have little cultivation and experience. The outside world would have overwhelmed them, some lowly demonic cultivators would have been able to push them around.

No one would have addressed Yan Zhengming as Sect Leader or Senior. He would have been just a little useless most senior disciple brother.

However, Yan Zhengming understands Tong Ru's heart better than anyone. When he entered the Sect Leader seal, he reviewed Tong Ru's path time and time again, and every time he did so, anxiety seized his heart a long while afterward. As long as the Sect Leader seal is in his hand, he feels like he is walking over thin ice or by a cliff over a deep abyss. Not daring to relax for a moment, he keeps reminding himself not to repeat his disciple grandfather's mistake.

He has to purify himself, eliminate his desires, and be patient.

However, as Yan Zhengming hears Cheng Qian's heartbeat from behind, all of his anxiety related to Tong Ru suddenly disappears.

If one could indeed keep the desire for more than what one's lot in life grants them under control, then why such desire appears at all?

The stronghold he built all this time around his heart, which seems to be impenetrable, is revealed to be built of mere sand. A slight push of a finger would cause it to collapse. In a lifetime, if there is no such moment in life, where one is so overwhelmed by feelings that one would risk even being turned into dust, would life even have any meaning?

“What are you waiting for?” A voice in Yan Zhengming’s heart asks. “Are you going to fall into the same mistake as that old fool Tong Ru and wait until separation by death?”

Yan Zhengming gently lifts Cheng Qian’s arms that are holding him, then turns and looks fixedly at Cheng Qian’s face. With all of his self-control, Yan Zhengming asks in a low voice, “Do you know how outrageous what you’ve been saying is? Do you know such a relationship is against the morals of this world?”

The calmness on Cheng Qian’s face doesn’t waver. “Our Master taught me to be at ease with myself?”

Yan Zhengming says, “But our Master didn’t teach you to indulge yourself! Aren’t you afraid that the indulgence will stir up your desires and passions, and you’ll be burnt to a crisp by the lightning of Heavenly Tribulation during ascension?”

Cheng Qian asks, “Then what kind of teachings have you been following that you ended up being besieged by the heart demon?”

Yan Zhengming can't refute that.

Cheng Qian looks at him and stresses every word, "I am not afraid of Heavenly Tribulation. It's only you that I am afraid of."

Those words are like lightning to Yan Zhengming's heart. He thinks to himself, "Crap, there is no way to persuade him now."

He stands there in silence for a long while, as if roots had grown from his feet. However, no flower blooms in his heart. On the contrary, there is an indescribable sorrow.

"Xiao-Qian," He finally says with difficulty. "You must not regret this in the future."

With a soft sigh, Cheng Qian looks at him awkwardly. "Senior brother, please wipe your tears first."

“Come here,” Yan Zhengming pulls Cheng Qian towards himself. He is full of tension inside, but his face is full of an unusual apathy.

Wearing that expression, he thinks to himself, “I was wrong to Xiao-Qian.”

Following that, he cradles Cheng Qian’s head and leans down to place a kiss. He only intended a light brush of lips, but can’t help himself and goes with the flow.

With an “Uhm”, Cheng Qian instinctively turns his head but is kept in place by firm hands. Soon, he is blanketed by a familiar orchid fragrance. In the beginning, he feels a bit scared as he passively accepts what the other person is doing. It’s the first time he learns that two people can have such acts with each other. He feels weirded out, even a bit annoyed. However, when he realizes who his partner is, that bit of annoyance immediately changes its flavor.

That sudden extraordinary intimacy causes heat to run rampant all over Cheng Qian’s scalp and hips like ants. His spine stiffens like a rod. He has heard of ‘mortal desire’ so many times before but has never truly experienced it, and now it is steadily engulfing him. As that unfamiliar

sensation stirs in his heart and his throat goes dry, he instinctively gulps and feels like he should recite the Scripture of Serenity.

Yan Zhengming dazedly holds Cheng Qian in his arms. He thinks, “I was wrong to our Master too.”

Unknown to him, the mark of the heart demon on his forehead suddenly turns into a gentle shade of red, then it contracts to the size of a drop of blood and disappears. The sect leader seal on his chest suddenly shines blindingly with a white light.

Yan Zhengming comes to his senses. Having no idea why the sect leader seal acted out like that, he rests his forehead on Cheng Qian’s shoulder and says with his eyes closed. “Let’s leave this place first. We shouldn’t stay here too long.”

Cheng Qian looks up and down at Yan Zhengming with an indescribable expression. He still can’t manage to return to his normal state. “Did you learn all that from the fake Scripture of Serenity?”

This is the first time he fully realizes that his most senior brother, who likes to act like a model of virtues, actually knows quite a lot of such forbidden topics.

The question makes Yan Zhengming choke. He wipes the dirt and blood on Cheng Qian's sleeves. "Shut up."

The white light from the sect leader seal bursts into a ray and casts a feather-like shape on the ground. The feather shakes a little along with the white light, as if to show the direction.

Yan Zhengming lifts the shining seal up and follows the feather. He tells Cheng Qian, "Follow it."

Under the white light of the seal, Cheng Qian can see that Yan Zhengming's face has become healthier. His worry easing a little, he asks, "Oh, back then you..."

Yan Zhengming interrupts him, "No! Don't even think about it! I burnt that evil book already!"

Cheng Qian asks, “I’d like to ask you what you meant with ‘for a sword cultivator, the heart demon haunts every step’. What are you talking about?”

Sect Leader Yan, who often projects his own heart on other people, finally learns that not everyone is a truant who avoided serious study at all costs like him. Being so embarrassed that he dares not turn back, he says weakly after a dry cough. “A sword cultivator carries too much aggression and killing intent. It doesn’t help that in the early stages, sword cultivators tend to work more on the body than the mind. With such a lack of understanding, the demon of the heart easily emerges. That’s what our Master told me during initiation. He also said, ‘When cultivation and potential match, a sword cultivator has the most advantage in battles. Therefore this path is especially difficult, and those who take it have to endure much more hardship.’”

At this part, a faint smile appears on his lips, which has been full of tension. “Back then, my first reaction when hearing that was to beg our Master to remove my qi sensitivity and let me take a different path, because no way I would want to become a sword cultivator.”

Yan Zhengming very rarely mentions the past. Cheng Qian quietly listens, feeling that those words indeed sound like something his most senior

brother would say.

“Then our Master scared me off the idea by saying that it’s possible to remove qi sensitivity. However, this process would be like rolling through a bed of spikes or being fried in hot oil, which had killed countless people. Of course such people had no need to consider which path they should take anymore,” Yan Zhengming says with a touch of self-mockery. “He completely made it up, yet I still believed him. The pros and cons seemed obvious. Even if one has to endure so much pain on the path of a sword cultivator one wants to die, it’d still be much better than dying for real. So I ended up agreeing.”

Cheng Qian stares fixedly at Yan Zhengming’s back. He can’t help but recall their first meeting as he listens to this story.

The miasma in the Land of Tenderness was even heavier than the Valley of the Yao. It was in such a setting that he first met his most senior brother. Even then, his first thought was, “What a beautiful person.”

However, right after that, his impression turned into “What an asshole.”

“What about this...” Cheng Qian raises his hand and lightly rubs his own forehead, “When did it start?”

After a long stretch of silence, Yan Zhengming says, “I don’t know.”

Was it from that time in the Vermillion Bird Tower? Or during the stay at Fuyao Estate before that? Or during the hundred years of separation? Or even during their reckless adolescence on Azure Dragon Island?

Just thinking about the topic yields countless possible answers. Before he could understand his feelings, that he was in love, his heart already moved by itself.

Yan Zhengming looks at Cheng Qian with complicated emotions and brushes aside the stray locks of hair on the latter’s forehead, then says softly, “I don’t know. Don’t ask me about it.”

Cheng Qian tactfully changes the topic. “How long have we been stuck here anyway? I wonder how things are going at Tai Yin Mountain.”

Yan Zhengming says, “The Celestial Divination Bureau has used up to the last drop of their resources. Han Yuan seems to have been at the end of his strength too. Neither side can have control over the other. What I’m worried about is whether the Celestial Divination Bureau has one more trick after the Demon Execution Array.”

Cheng Qian is silent. What happened was really something one has to see with one’s own eyes to understand. If there hadn’t been traitors within the Celestial Divination Bureau who altered the array, if they hadn’t happened to be dragged in, if it hadn’t been their luck that Li Yun had the True Dragon Flag, no one could have broken that array.

That trap Wu Changtian set outside Fuyao Mountain wasn’t simply to weaken Han Yuan, but actually to finish him off.

In the present, the Demon Execution Array has been destroyed. The Celestial Divination Bureau has nothing else to stop Han Yuan. It’s likely he’ll charge into Tai Xing Mountain and massacre all cultivators who recklessly stand in his way, then he’ll go North to the Capital and settle the debt between him and the Celestial Divination Bureau as well as the mortal Imperial Court.

“Death is too light a punishment for what the Celestial Divination Bureau did,” Yan Zhengming says, “I don’t believe the one sitting on the dragon throne in the Capital is a simple mortal either. Can someone who claims to be eternal like him accept the fate of dying within mere decades while the Celestial Divination Bureau under him continue to go on? That doesn’t add up.”

Cheng Qian says, “Cultivators don’t interfere in mortal affairs. That’s how things are. Trivial issues of the mortal realm can easily distract a cultivator from their path. Without extraordinary talent, that cultivator would face a lot of obstacles. How can the Emperor achieve immortality while clinging to his throne?”

“The imperial family has all kinds of resources. They can get whatever cultivation methods and elixirs they want. If they can’t cultivate their spiritual energy, they can turn to medicine,” Yan Zhengming says, “Besides, don’t you get the implications of what Wu Changtian told us? The Celestial Divination Bureau is definitely being controlled by someone at court. Since these holier-than-thou fuckers consider what they call justice enough reason to ruin people’s lives, how can they let themselves be controlled by mere mortals? I don’t care if they want to seek death, it doesn’t matter to us anyway. The issue is, if Han Yuan leads the demonic cultivators marching North, they will undoubtedly commit the sin of taking innocent lives on the way. Should we kill him when that happens?”

At that moment, Yan Zhengming pauses his steps and looks. Ahead of him, a faint light comes from somewhere.

The guiding feather flies directly into that light. As they follow the light back to its source for a while, they enter a bright open space.

Countless steps of a stone stair appear in front of them.

Normal stone steps are usually built on something like a mountain or a building, the upper step placed on the lower one all the way to the top. However, the steps aren't based on anything. They float in the air up to an unseen destination somewhere in the endless sky.

Cheng Qian suddenly feels an unseen force suppressing all of his spiritual energy. In a blink of an eye, he becomes a mere mortal. Under the steps, he is just like a little ant.

Cheng Qian ponders, "This is..."

Yan Zhengming frowns as he says, “This is likely the Tower of No Regret.”

The Tower of No Regret is a hundred eight thousand steps high (2). No matter how powerful a cultivator is, they’ll become just a mortal when they are here and must walk up every step. For the first time in life, Cheng Qian knows what a neck-breaking height looks like. A normal person would be scared just looking at it. Climbing up is out of question.

Yan Zhengming tentatively climbs up a step. Before he can steady himself, a strong wind crashes into his face. As he just remembers that his protective layer of spiritual energy has disappeared, the wind nearly touches his eyes. Yan Zhengming hastily jumps backward back to the ground. He is fast, but the wind still tears off one of his sleeves.

How on earth could Tong Ru climb to the top?!

Both of them are terrified. Yan Zhengming thinks to himself, “I thought our disciple grandfather was mad the normal way. I didn’t expect he was that mad!”

Cheng Qian recalls his few encounters with Lord Beiming. Back then he was still just a child, so he was completely ignorant of what someone with that title was capable of. It isn't until now that he fully realizes the gap wide as the sky between him and his disciple grandfather.

As Cheng Qian is in his trance, Yan Zhengming suddenly claps loudly right next to his ears, making him startle back to awareness.

"I know what you're thinking," Yan Zhengming says, "That person was already in qi deviation when he left the Three Lives mystic site. A person who has gone mad must be different from someone who has not. You being unable to repeat what he did isn't necessarily because he was more powerful than you."

Glancing at his sleeve, he laughs lightly, "Well, I'm a cutsleeve for real now. The Tower of No Regret is creeping me out. We shouldn't stay here."

Letting one of his arms loose by his side and tapping lightly on Shuang Ren's scabbard, Cheng Qian says as he walks, "If it were you, would you climb up the Tower of No Regret to take the Wish-granting Stone back too?"

Yan Zhengming thinks to himself, “He really knows how to choose his target.”

If the obsession in his heart hadn’t been exactly the same as Tong Ru’s, why would his spiritual awareness have latched onto Tong Ru when he got into the Sect Leader seal?

If he hadn’t tasted what it was like to be in qi deviation, why would he have forced his cultivation and charge in without regard for anything?

Naturally, he can’t tell Cheng Qian about that.

In complete contradiction of his actual sentiments, Yan Zhengming assumes a righteous air. “Of course not, whether it’s happiness or sorrow, union or separations, satisfaction or disappointment, it’s just part of life. We haven’t reached ascension so we are still mortals. As long as we are aware of that, we should understand that we are mere flesh and blood. How can we make everything in this life follow our will? There are always such moments when our powers fall short and we fail to get what we want. Whether it’s cultivation or anything else, if we take an extreme attitude and demand eternal perfection, we wouldn’t be able to last long.”

What a shameless performance.

Cheng Qian doesn't reply. He turns away to hide his smile, yet Yan Zhengming's sharp senses still catch it.

Yan Zhengming demands, "What are you laughing at?"

"I'm laughing because you said that as smoothly as telling a fairy tale," Cheng Qian bluntly states the truth without any regard for Yan Zhengming's vanity. "Seeing as a certain someone was under siege by the heart demon not that long ago."

Yan Zhengming "..."

"If you shut up right now, I won't be petty and hold it against you," From about two steps away, Yan Zhengming turns back and lets the unsaid words show on his face. "Come here! Apologize now!"

Keeping his silence, Cheng Qian thinks to himself, "How will he turn out if I keep indulging his bad habits?"

However, right after that, he internally shakes his head. “Ah well, he has always had these bad habits from the start anyway.”

Thus Cheng Qian apologizes just to get it over with. “Yes, yes, you’re such a generous and magnanimous senior brother. Your words are like music to my ears. Ah, I just remember, if this place is at the back of Fuyao Mountain, can we go back from here?”

“You’re thinking too much,” Sect Leader Yan says full of confidence.

“Fuyao Mountain is Fuyao Mountain. The Valley of the Heart Demon is the Valley of the Heart Demon. The two places are next to each other, but aren’t necessarily sealed in the same place... Huh?”

As soon as he says that, he finds out that there is a gate behind the Tower of No Regret. All words failing him, he thinks to himself. “What the heck is my luck that I’ve to eat my words as soon as I say them? Can it be that we can really return from this place?”

The feather that has been guiding them falls softly on the gate and disappears without a trace. There is a small keyhole on the gate, its shape the same as the Sect Leader seal.

Yan Zhengming takes off the seal and tentatively puts it in the keyhole. It is a perfect match, as if they were originally created together.

Right away, there is a low head-ringing noise, as a huge stone gate reveals itself and slowly opens.

Three wooden plates suddenly emerge from the other side of the gate. On the plates are carved “Heaven”, “Earth” and “Humanity”. Yan Zhengming moves to catch all three. However, as his hand moves closer to the plate with “Heaven” on it, the other two retreat backward. The implication is obvious. He can only pick one from the three.

“Will the plate with ‘Heaven’ help us to achieve immediate ascension?” Yan Zhengming smirks. “Will you pick it?”

Cheng Qian doesn’t reply. He just looks at Yan Zhengming with a hint of a smile, making the latter feel a bit awkward. Yan Zhengming mutters, “Stop tempting me all the time like that.”

Then he picks up the wooden plate with “Humanity” on it without hesitation. With a cracking sound, the Sect Leader seal removes itself from the stone gate and returns to his neck. Right after that, white light suddenly bursts from the wooden plate. The Tower of No Regret and the strange ancient stone gate suddenly feel far away. Surrounding them are the echoes of countless people and their bustling activities.

Ever since the name “Fu Yao” came into being and the ancient stone stele was put in its place to mark the sect’s lineage, countless years have passed. The Nine-floored Library Tower was built. Countless personalities have left countless traces on the steps. Then no matter if their footsteps were light like a feather or left a deep mark on the stonework, they all gradually disappear.

Under the eternal rains and winds, even mountains become seas. That is how the world is. The only unchanging truth is the relentless cycle of life and death, glory and decline.

This is the Path of Humanity, which takes the middle position among the three great realms.

(1) The first lines of Miscellaneous Poem I () by Tao Yuanming

(2) According to Buddhism, there are 108 calamities/misfortunes that haunt the mortal life.

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Chapter 85

Human life had no roots, floating like dust over footpaths.

Dispersed bit by bit by revolving wind, here, the self was already ever-changing.[\[1\]](#)

Upon entering the gate of immortals, could the mundane world be stood apart from?

With divine capabilities, could all be done as one's heart desired?

Someone with the mighty power to overturn the skies, as Tong Ru had been; where had his soul returned to, now?

Beyond that was them, these juniors that were at a loss, comprehending nothing.

Yan Zhengming had never spoken with Tong Ru, but he had always held a faint grudge towards his disciple grandfather. Sometimes, he wouldn't be able to resist thinking that if Tong Ru hadn't meddled so much or made anything like the Hall of Initiation, he wouldn't have drawn in the envies of others, nor been dragged into the Three Lives Mystic Site.

Even going in the Site, if he hadn't been so extreme, so believing in prophecy, had some self-complacency, hadn't been so willful, had listened to his friend's urging, or hadn't had so many improper thoughts...

Maybe their Master wouldn't have died, let alone fallen into the degraded corpse of a weasel.

The Fuyao Sect wouldn't have totally, irrevocably collapsed, either.

Their few would be just like those talentless, idiot disciples of White Tiger Estate, their cultivation base being just a bit, and their consciences being only a bit, too, having never seen more than a glimpse of the world; they would inevitably be bungling things up whenever going out to do tasks, where a couple of demonic cultivators could then mess with them into turning around in circles.

No one would be calling him ‘Sect Leader’, nor ‘Senior’. He would only be a Most Senior Brother that wasn’t particularly worthy of respect.

However, he was also the one that understood Tong Ru the most. Within the Sect Leader Seal, he had walked Tong Ru’s path many times over again, and each time he had looked back, he would tremble with apprehension for a long time, clutching the Seal in hand. Like treading upon an abyss, like approaching thin ice, he hadn’t dared to be relaxed for one moment, always reminding himself to learn from another’s example, and never walk in the trailing dust of his sectly grandfather.

He wanted tranquility, wanted freedom, wanted less desire, wanted open-mindedness...

Yet, at this moment, he heard the sound of Cheng Qian’s heartbeat coming from behind him, and all of his ill-feelings towards Tong Ru suddenly vanished like smoke.

If ‘improper thoughts’ could be suppressed, then how?

The dam he had long been forging in his heart was like a pile of sand, assuming a precariously impressive appearance, yet made to crumble apart with one finger. If there was never such a moment in one’s life, where they felt like the world was turning on its head and were delighted to be crushed apart in body, even though they would be soaring up and into the Great Dao — what fun could there be said to be in that?

What are you waiting for? a voice in his mind asked. *Will you be like that idiot Tong Ru, waiting until seas dry up and rocks decompose, until yin and yang separate?*

Yan Zhengming clasped Cheng Qian's hands that were overlapping in front of him, then gently pried his arms apart. Within the dark, he turned around to stare at the other's face, restraining himself into a hushed voice. "Do you have any idea how irrational this is? Or how this violates the law of Heaven, the proper way human relations go?"

Cheng Qian's face remained unchanged. "Master told me to be free."

"But he didn't tell you to be self-indulgent! If you indulge in the seven emotions and six desires, are you not afraid that when you ascend, that heavenly tribulation will smite you into paste?"

"What sort of path will *you* fit in with, then, getting ensnared by a demon of the heart?"

Yan Zhengming had nothing to answer with.

Cheng Qian watched him. "Senior brother, I'm not afraid of tribulations," he said, word by word. "Only you."

Upon hearing this, Yan Zhengming thought, with a rumbling in his heart, *It's over. There's no coming back from this.*

He stood there mutely for a long while, as if roots had grown beneath his soles. The flower of his heart had never been in full bloom, instead having senselessly gained an indescribable, incomprehensible sense of sorrow.

"Xiao Qian." He gave a final struggle. "Don't regret this later."

Cheng Qian lightly sighed, looking at him powerlessly. “Wipe your tears off before anything else, senior brother.”

“Come here.” Yan Zhengming reached out and pulled Cheng Qian over. His expression was much too taut, looking somewhat bizarrely cold.

He thought, bearing similar coldness, *I’ve let you down, Xiao Qian.*

After that, he captured the back of Cheng Qian’s head, leaned over, and kissed him. He had wanted to merely dabble in this and then stop, yet ended up being unable to help himself.

Cheng Qian let out an *mmph* and tilted his head back a bit on instinct, but he was solidly caged by a pair of arms. He felt that his entire being was being encased by that familiar scent of orchids. He was a little shocked, at the onset; this was the first time he had ever experienced such a thing, and it was a bit strange and uncomfortable, but once he remembered who the one before him was, that shallow sense of strangeness abruptly changed in sensation.

This suddenly-arising, peculiar intimacy caused both his scalp and middle to go numb, his vertebra stiffening into a wooden club. The thousand zhang of the mortal world’s red dust, which he had long heard the name of yet had never seen the true look of, began to bundle him up tight. All of a sudden, an unfamiliar agitation sprouted in his heart; throat dry, he swallowed involuntarily, getting the sense that it was his turn to recite from the Scripture of Serenity.

Yan Zhengming embraced him dispassionately, thinking, *I’ve also... let you down, Master.*

The inner demon’s mark between his brows unwittingly morphed into an unadulterated cinnabar color, after which it harvested a drop of blood, then

sunk into his forehead, vanishing without a trace. The Sect Leader Seal on his chest started to emitted white, eye-stinging light.

He abruptly snapped out of it. Unsure of what wrong meds the Seal had taken again, he placed his forehead onto Cheng Qian's shoulder, closing his eyes. "Let's leave. This isn't a good place to stay in."

Cheng Qian sized him up with a weird face, still out of sorts. "Is this everything you learned from that sham Scripture?"

For the very first time, he was distinctly aware that the things his dignified senior knew about seemed to be too much.

Yan Zhengming nearly felt pain as he breathed, casually wiping off the stains of blood and filth from his hands onto Cheng Qian's sleeve. "Shut up."

The exploding light of the Seal was seen to cast upon the ground, constructing into the shape of a feather. While white light twinkled within it, the feather gently trembled, appearing to point in a direction ahead.

Yan Zhengming slightly lifted the shining little sealstone up in his hand, following the lead the plumage had set. "Keep up."

By means of the light, Cheng Qian saw that his face had regained its color, and his heart relaxed some. "By the way, your—"

"No way! No how!" Yan Zhengming interrupted. "Don't even dream about it! I already burned that evil book!"

"...I was trying to ask what you meant by your phrase of, 'sword cultivators get heart demons at every step.' What were *you* thinking of?"

Sect Leader Yan, who had been using his own self to measure another, then discovered that not everyone was as fond of following poor examples as he was, and was immediately so embarrassed, he was too afraid to even turn his head. Giving a dry cough, his voice automatically got slightly weaker. “Sword cultivation has considerable ruthless and murderous qi. In early phases, there’s heavy discipline on the body with light cultivation of the mind, making those not prominent in the beginning, but the further it goes, the easier it is to get inner demons. That is what Master explained to me when I entered the sect; ‘With identical base and realm, sword cultivation is top-tier upon first setting out. In consequence, this road is also especially difficult to walk, its practice further challenging, and even further painful.’”

Upon saying this, the corner of his mouth, which had been flat all this time, finally showed a tiny, indistinct smile. “When I heard that, my first reaction was to plead with him to destroy my qi sense, deciding not to do sword cultivation and determined to switch to another path to go down.”

He rarely ever brought up the past on his own. Cheng Qian listened quietly, feeling like these words were ones his senior needed to speak of.

“After that, he scared me with saying that my qi sense could be gotten rid of, but the process would be no different than rolling in a bed of nails, or into a pot of oil. Many would not escape that boiling, simply dying with their legs kicked out, and then everything would be done with. There would be no need to care about how you entered the Dao.” He laughed at himself. “I actually believed his lies, then did some evaluating. The path of sword cultivation would make one be in so much pain, they wouldn’t want to be alive, but it would still be better than literally dying. I had no choice but to compromise.”

Cheng Qian focused his sights on his back. In the wake of his voice, he couldn’t help but think back to the scene of when he had first seen Yan Zhengming.

Land of Tenderness had had a heavier yao aura than the group in the Valley of the Yao, and alongside that current of yao energy, he had gotten his first glimpse of his most senior brother. At the time, he had thought, *He really is good looking.*

Though, the very next moment, those thoughts had changed. *He really isn't anything at all.*

“Then, what’s happening to you...” Cheng Qian gently rubbed the space between his own brows with a hand. “When did it start?”

Yan Zhengming was quiet for a minute. “I’m not sure.”

Had it been Vermilion Bird Tower? Or the previous Fuyao Estate? Or, in that span of a hundred years of isolation... or even on Azure Dragon Island, when he had been young and vapid?

Perfunctorily pondering like so, he felt like there were a million loose threads that he couldn’t wrap his head around, a heart that had never before thumped already being moved.

He looked at Cheng Qian, a hundred feelings mixing inside him, and then went to fix his messy bangs. “I’m not sure,” he answered softly. “Don’t ask.”

Willing to follow his advice, Cheng Qian turned the topic around. “And *I’m* not sure how long we’ve been trapped here. How is Tai Yin Mountain doing?”

“The Celestial Divination Bureau is in dire straits. Han Yuan is also likely an arrow at the end of his flight. Nobody can care about anyone else, and after that Demon Execution Array, the Bureau probably doesn’t have any follow-up moves.”

Cheng Qian was quiet. He hadn't known as much before, so he hadn't clearly understood, only doing so after witnessing a bout for himself. If there hadn't been a Bureau revolt where the array method had secretly been switched out, if they hadn't coincidentally gotten swept up in it, if Li Yun hadn't coincidentally been holding a True Dragon Flag... then nobody would have been able to break the array single-handedly.

Wu Changtian laying down a trap outside of Fuyao Mountain hadn't only been to cripple Han Yuan's fighting power. It had been a counter.

Now that the Array was ruined, there were probably no further steps the Bureau could take to obstruct Han Yuan. He would go straight to Tai Xing Mountain and massacre to the last a bunch of cultivators that didn't know their own strengths and would vainly attempt to block his path, following which he would go up North to the capital, then take his revenge upon the Bureau, and the mortals of the Dynasty...

"Death wouldn't absolve the Bureau of its crimes," Yan Zhengming said. "The one who sits upon the Dragon Chair in the capital... I don't believe he's mortal at all. Each day, he self-proclaims himself to be long-lived; could he tolerate the 'splendor' of several decades of himself getting old and dying with grayed hairs, watching on as the trifling Divination Bureau stretches on into forever? There's no way."

"Cultivators aren't to get involved in secular matters; that's a fundamental convention. The insignificant events of the mortal world are liable to distract the mind, and unless one's aptitude is at its peak, their cultivation practice will inevitably be hindered. How can he play as Emperor, and also think to live unaging forever?"

"The imperial family has plenty of money and means. However many martial techniques and alchemical pills it wants is how many it'll get, and if practice can't be achieved, they can just take medicine. Besides, didn't you hear Wu Changtian's implication? The Bureau is definitely controlled by

someone in the Dynasty. How could they, those fake high-and-mighties that feel themselves to be incomparably righteous and see human lives as wildgrass, be controlled by a mortal? In any case, who knows what they're even doing. They're no hindrance to us, but Han Yuan leading a group of demons up North is certain to be a grave slaughter — when the time comes, will we kill him, or no?"

Right then, Yan Zhengming stopped in his tracks. His gaze followed after a single direction, and he saw a burst of faint light apparently coming from there.

The guiding white feather led directly into those rays. After walking towards the source for about an incense stick's worth of time, the field of view suddenly opened into a wide clearing.

A flight of stone stairs leapt up before the eyes.

Steps tiering above would typically be set for a mountain or a building, but for these, there was nothing. Layer after layer of them gathered in midair, looking to pass through to the sky, the top unable to be seen at first look.

Cheng Qian sensed the true essence inside him seem to become subdued by some unknown force, genuinely morphing him into a mortal for the time being. Standing below the stairs, he was like an insect — so insignificant, he was nothing.

"This is..."

Yan Zhengming furrowed his brow. "It looks to be the Tower of No Regrets."

The Tower's height was one-hundred-and-eight-thousand steps. Here, all who flew to the Heavens to escape the Earth were akin to mortals, and had to ascend step by step themselves. This was the first time Cheng Qian had

known what it was to tilt his head back until his neck broke; average people would be feeling dread just from looking upward alone, to say nothing of going up there in person.

Yan Zhengming took a probing step up, but before he could stand steady, a gust of strong wind came rising up head-on. By the time he reacted to his body-protecting primordial qi being gone, the wind was already closing in on him. He quickly pulled back a step, flipping off of the stone, but in spite of his agile movements, one of his sleeves was still cut apart by the wind.

How had Tong Ru gotten up there?!

The two of them were alarmed at heart. *I was thinking that our sect-grandfather was overall inscrutable*, Yan Zhengming thought, *but I didn't expect him to be this inscrutable!*

Cheng Qian just thought back to his not-many encounters with Lord Beiming. He had still been young at the time, and hadn't noticed how formidable the man had been. Only now did he discover the chasm-like gap between them.

While in his trance, Yan Zhengming suddenly pat his ear. Cheng Qian jolted back to his senses.

"I know what you're thinking," the other said. "When he came out of the Mystic Site, he was already in qi deviation. A madman isn't the same as a typical person. You cannot walk down the road he did, and that's not necessarily because of how formidable he was."

He lowered his head to glance down at his own sleeve, smiling. "This is a true-made cut-sleeve... the Tower of No Regrets is quite abnormal. We mustn't stay here for much longer."

Cheng Qian hung one hand by his side, lightly tapping on Shuang Ren's scabbard. "If you... you were to ascend the Tower, would you request something of the Wish Granting Stone?"

You really had to ask, Yan Zhengming thought.

If the obsession of his heart hadn't coincided with Tong Ru's, how could his spiritual awareness have adhered to the man's form inside the Seal?

If he didn't know what it felt like to qi deviate, why would he stubbornly bring up his own cultivation base at the Immortal Binding Platform, directly barging in regardless of the consequences?

None of that would be suitable to mention to Cheng Qian, of course.

Yan Zhengming, who was the type to say one thing and do another, lectured him in an upright manner. "Of course not. Sorrows, joys, separations, reunions, the twelve phases of the moon — those are all commonplace in the mortal realm. Since you have not yet ascended to immortality, you are still mortal. If you know yourself, you should understand that as you are a physical body born of mortal womb, there is no way that everything can go as your heart wants. Inevitably, there will be times where powers cannot be achieved, and not getting what you seek doesn't mean you can't practice cultivation. If the extreme of perfection is sought after in everything, you definitely couldn't last for long."

How very pretentious...

Cheng Qian didn't answer. He tilted his head down to smile, but still got caught by Yan Zhengming's keenness.

"What are you smiling at?"

“At your lecturing being nicer to hear than your singing,” Cheng Qian disclosed, not sparing his feelings, nor dignity. “I’m unsure of who exactly was just trapped in a heart demon, unable to get out of it.”

“...I’m not going to bicker with you so shut up right now.” Yan Zhengming turned around, stood two paces apart from him, and hung the unspoken latter half of his words amidst his features: ‘Hurry up and scramble to apologize.’

Cheng Qian said nothing for a short time, mentally saying, *How could encouraging a temper like this ever amount to anything good?*

Immediately after that, he just inwardly shook his head. *Ah, nevermind. Hasn’t he always acted like this?*

“Okay, Mister Senior Brother, be magnanimous. Your talking and singing are equally nice to hear,” he thus said, cupping his hands half-assedly. “By the way, if this is the backside of Fuyao Mountain, can we return from here?”

“You need to think better,” Sect Leader Yan replied, like a big-tailed wolf. “Fuyao Mountain is Fuyao Mountain, Heart Demon Valley is Heart Demon Valley. The two may neighbor each other, but they didn’t get sealed up together... hah?”

Right as he said that, he noticed that there was a door behind the Tower, and his words momentarily became stuck. *What an unlucky crow’s beak that I have, for what I just said to smack me in the face,* he thought. *We won’t actually be able to get through, right?*

The guiding feather fluttered, landed upon that door, and disappeared. The door had a minuscule groove upon it, which was exactly the same shape as the Sect Leader Seal.

Yan Zhengming tentatively removed the Seal from himself, then carefully inserted it into the groove. They fit snugly together, as if they had been one to begin with.

In that moment, an ear-splitting rumble sounded out. A large stone door of about ten zhang in height showed itself, then slowly opened.

Three wooden plaques suddenly flew out of it, each separately engraved with the characters of 'Heaven', 'Earth', and 'Human'. Yan Zhengming had wanted to grab one, but as soon as he reached out for the 'Heaven' plaque, the other two shifted like they were going to withdraw. This meant that only one out of the three could be chosen.

"If I choose the 'Heaven' plaque, will we be able to ascend to the Heavens straightaway?" Yan Zhengming smiled. "Would *you* choose it?"

Cheng Qian didn't make a peep, looking at him with a bit of a smile. Seeing this, Yan Zhengming mumbled uneasily, "Quit tempting me all the time."

With that, he selected the 'Human' one without thought, only to hear a click. The Sect Leader Seal came loose from the door on its own, then went straight back to his neck. The wooden plaque began to blaze with white light in the next second, and the nearby Tower and stone door became distant in their entirety. Like time itself was before them, countless people and voices flashed past in a cacophony.

From the completion of the name 'Fuyao', ancient stone tablets established a legacy of thousands and thousands of years. The nine-floor Library Tower was created, then set upon the ground. Footprints large, small, fat, and thin gradually flickered at the entryway, either as shallow as light gauze or set deep into the stone, after which they all faded away into nothing. Only the vegetation edging the secluded mountain pools, year after year, gradually became a wave of green.

The cold sea and [mulberry fields](#), fallen beneath the fine rain and light breeze that had not changed for ages, were the only things eternal in this cycle of prosperity and withering.

This was the path of humanity, the middle of the three realms.

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Chapter 86

Beneath their feet, a massive array spread out like a slowly-igniting fire beacon. A sigh, coming from who-knew-where, was in their ears.

Cheng Qian was stunned. “This looks like the one Han Yuan drew outside of Fuyao Mountain that one day.”

“Shh...” Yan Zhengming raised a hand and covered Cheng Qian’s eyes. “Listen carefully.”

The demonic cultivator that had arranged the array once said that this one’s name was the ‘Mountain-Hearing Array’. What could be heard, then?

The depths of the darkness first emitted the fragmented cries of insects, followed by the understated sound of water, wind blowing past the grasslands, someone seemingly turning over nearby...

“This seems to be the back of the mountain,” Yan Zhengming whispered.

On the grass beside a secluded pool near a mountain cave, a few youths had carried a little thing that was maybe human, maybe yao. Suffering dually from cold and hunger in wait for their Master, they had dozed off unwittingly, and once they had opened their eyes, half-awake in their daze, this had been the exact noise that had poured into their ears.

In turn, the wind passed through a bamboo forest, the fragrance of its leaves seemingly about to come at one’s call. The thin bamboo shaft of a brush rapped a stone table, producing a crisp and slightly revolving sound. The instant next, there was a flapping noise, as if a paper was getting lifted up by the breeze, yet not wafted far away. Something was apparently holding it down by a corner, making it so that it only made noise non-stop.

This was the Residence of Peace.

Neither of them made a peep, quietly listening for a long time. They seemed to go in a circle around Fuyao Mountain, all the way until the the array under them dimmed, its final trace of light vanishing into the blackness.

So, Han Yuan had secretly come to the foot of the Mountain that day, and aggressively laid down a dangerous-looking array... just to hear the sounds of Fuyao?

Cheng Qian wasn't sure what emotions were in his heart for a moment.

Then, the hand covering the sights before him was put down. Yan Zhengming grasped the shining sealstone in his palm, and their surroundings promptly went black. Inside the dark, a white figure was seen to abruptly walk out, a wooden sword held in his hand. Not far from them, he haughtily performed an ancient rite, lifting his hand to draw out a Fuyao Wooden Sword-initiating gesture.

What was the meaning of this?

The man demonstrated the beginning of the Wooden Sword where he stood, disregarding anyone else.

At the start, he was a teen in an outfit of plain white clothing. As the Wooden Sword advanced layer by layer, move by move, his countenance gradually morphed into that of an adult's, the wooden sword he held transformed into a prismatic blade dripping with cold light, and the clothing on him turned into graceful brocade robes.

Every form of his every motion was similar to what their Master had taught, but there were some unclear areas of subtle difference.

By the time one endless set of Wooden Sword techniques was over, the sword-dancer had since become an old man, his brocade robes had become plain white clothing once again, and his precious sword had turned into an edgeless wooden one once again. He hung his sword with pensive eyes, the type of tranquility about him being from one that could see through the red dust of the world.

His set of swordplay had been as snugly satisfying as the flow of water. Both of them were practitioners of the sword, with Yan Zhengming being a sword cultivator in particular, so they could naturally make out the depths therein. Respectively shocked for a moment, neither had the mind to say anything.

The next instant, the elder in white suddenly lifted his head, then stabbed his sword at them.

Cheng Qian shoved Yan Zhengming away, and they came three chi apart. The wooden sword pierced through the air in the middle, frigid sword wind paring off a strand of disheveled hair that was hanging at Cheng Qian's shoulder.

After that, in the blink of an eye, it vanished, and two elders in white instead appeared on-scene. They floated in, feet not touching the ground, and immediately separated the other two.

When Yan Zhengming misstepped in his dodge, his entire person sunk into darkness, and promptly disappeared.

Cheng Qian suffered a fright. "Senior brother!"

His true essence was being firmly repressed into his inner sanctum, making him temporarily no different than a mortal. Shuang Ren, which had frequently been able to link up with his state of mind before this, suddenly became incomparably stagnant. He used all of his effort to draw it out and

block, but the elder's wooden sword seemed to be pressing down with all the strength of Mount Tai, numbing his wrist. Adding that onto the exceeding strangeness of this situation, Cheng Qian instinctively retreated.

That retreat didn't matter, though, as Shuang Ren immediately showed signs of backlashing. The fierce, ungrateful sword hadn't acted up in many years, so he had nearly forgotten what a piece of shit it was.

The old man's second move was already on its way over. Cheng Qian had to grit his teeth and intercept the maneuver again, not allowed to take half a step away.

The pressure on his hands was getting greater and greater, like the sky had collapsed and was pressing down upon his shoulders.

His human strength was ultimately not holding up well, and, combined with this unforgiving sword plus disallowance to retreat, his arms ended up shaking, wrists making soft cracking sounds from where they were stuck, as if his tendons were spraining. He forcefully started battering with his true essence that had been sealed inside his qi sea, and it incessantly charged against his inner sanctum; frost flashed past his eyes again and again, yet was further rigidly stifled back down again and again, too.

He was anxious to find Yan Zhengming, and didn't want to wrangle with this old man mortal-style one bit. He suffered a bout of befuddlement at once, flying a kick at his counterpart's abdomen.

Unexpectedly, his foot kicked emptiness. The elder himself was just an apparition, the sword he held alone being real.

Upon stepping on air, the strength in his arms was lost, and the old one's wooden sword viciously pounded into his chest, for true this time. Had his physical form not fully tempered the Spirit-Collecting Jade, this strike could have broken a row of his ribs.

He choked and coughed a few times, feeling half of his body go numb from the hit. All of the wounds on his back that had stopped bleeding now split open.

The elder looked at him mutely, dead indifference suffusing his turbid eyes. Holding his wooden sword up level, he pointed it at his chest, and for a moment, the only surrounding sound was Cheng Qian's slightly rough panting.

All of a sudden, the old man opened his mouth. "You want to walk the 'path of humanity', with that reckless mentality of yours?"

Cheng Qian had been of the mind to beat this guy into a flour sack, but when he heard that, his actions stopped. "Senior, you're..."

"Take the blows, talk less drivel!" The man swept his sword all the way back horizontally, then put the 'Peak' in 'Decline from the Peak', his wooden sword slashing out a long arc akin to a full moon.

Were this to land, his True Jade would likely be shattered.

Cheng Qian dared not take this lightly, nor did he dare to stubbornly contend with him, slightly pressed as he stepped once forwards to avoid that edge. Recalling with difficulty the spell of breakaway moves he had studied when his cultivation base had been humble, he hurriedly fell back onto the 'Subtlety' maneuver of identical style.

'Subtlety' concentrated on the concept of 'wind picking up from the tips of duckweeds'; that meant that when something was at its peak, there would actually have long been roots of disaster buried within it, where those roots and that brightly-blooming situation strengthened up together, ultimately becoming a turning point of going from prosperity to decline. The move was variable and extraordinarily low-key, inharmonious with Cheng Qian's habitual category of Tide Swordplay, as well as the overbearing qi mixed in

with it — he quickly strained himself enacting it, causing his movements to automatically slow a bit.

That slowness could be described as a hairsbreadth of mistake cheating him out of a thousand li of distance. The webs of his hands numbed, and Shuang Ren clanged as it was sent flying by the wooden sword!

“...”

He had studied the blade since of the age of ten until now, Shuang Ren having swept across the world. It had never before been humiliated in this way.

The man in white stared at him expressionlessly. Doing some motion with his hand, Shuang Ren, laying on the ground, soared up to come before Cheng Qian. “Get up.”

Cheng Qian’s fingers tightened.

“Idiot,” the elder spoke once more.

About to crush his own fingers into pieces, Cheng Qian grabbed Shuang Ren, and then the elder leapt straight up. In an instant, millions of sword copies whistled past his face, dense as rain at spring’s onset; there was no possibility of escape, nor of defense.

This was *actual* Subtlety!

Cheng Qian’s pupils constricted, suddenly becoming aware that the other was apparently teaching him. He looked on, dumbstruck, for a moment, until that wooden sword ripped through those inexhaustible mirages to stop perfectly straight under the tip of his nose.

“Have you never properly learned the sword before?” the old man asked.
“Who is your Master?”

Cheng Qian paused, beyond his control.

Muchun Zhenren had indeed instructed him for no more than over a year, then quickly transferred the entire Fuyao Wooden Sword skillset to him at the Valley of No Sorrow, counting on little else other than his cleverness and highly-retentive memory as a child. Afterwards, the sect’s list of moves had basically been written out from his memory, with their most senior brother amending areas of discrepancy.

Now that he thought about it, he had noted those in his head in a rush, while also knowing little about them. Had they necessarily been correct?

Had the sloppy, off-kilter swordplay said senior brother had learned as a child actually managed to amend anything?

“Our Master died when we had barely entered the sect,” Cheng Qian quietly explained.

The other furrowed his brows.

“Before he reached his end, he used his primordial spirit to demonstrate Fuyao Wooden Sword to me,” he respectfully said, suppressing his temper. “I was in a rush, and there’s probably some areas I didn’t recall clearly—“

His words were interrupted by a cold huff. The old man got even more obviously angry upon hearing this, for some reason. He waved his wooden sword around, swatting it on Cheng Qian’s shoulder over and over again, berating him on repeat. “Idiot! Idiot!”

Cheng Qian had never before been affixed with so many labels of ‘idiot’ in his life. He really had no way to argue, however — who could fit them

better than he?

Faced with a senior of his own sect, even if the other said that he had a seven-orificed chamberpot for a head, he was obliged to listen.

The elder kept hopping about on his feet for a minute, and then his form suddenly changed; with one turn around, he transformed into the image of that middle-aged man in brocade robes, another Peak move rippling outward.

Cheng Qian's scalp prickled. When this senior had put on the appearance of an old man, his utilization of Decline from the Peak's swordstyle had been ruthless, yet more inclined towards the 'Decline' part, and had rather lacked momentum. In his appearance of a middle-aged man, though, that wooden sword had changed into an unnamed, high-quality sword, which precisely matched up with Peak's swordwill, its might unable to be spoken of in the same breath.

Innumerable thoughts revolved around Cheng Qian's mind in the span of a second. After mulling over Subtlety, which the elder had just glossed over, from start to finish once through, he toughened up his hide to execute the move once again.

And he got it!

Yet, before he had time to rejoice, the man had hoisted his sword up with no further word, then flipped his entire body up into the air. From his high vantage point, he hacked downwards — this was the changed form of Peak!

Cheng Qian's pupils quickly shrank. The next instant, he discovered that the restriction on his true essence had been cleared, which frantically circulated inside his qi sea from being confined for so long. Shuang Ren softly buzzed in his hand, and then immediately separated into eight sword copies for a fight at close quarters...

He didn't wait for his opponent to switch maneuvers, and went ahead to the first step of entering Subtlety's freezing, frost-like swordwill, which flooded into every crevice of the entire space, leaving no indicators, yet being omnipresent. The man's third Peak wave swiftly came, and their two currents of true essence collided in mid-air, creating an immense, earth-shaking sound.

His senior didn't stay his hand, continuously chopping down with sixteen moves of Peak, which got trickier and more dangerous with each consecutive strike.

For the first time, Cheng Qian had truly grasped Subtlety's swordwill. That initially somewhat sluggish and rough swordplay became increasingly proficient, and Shuang Ren raised aloft its sky-filling sword copies, spreading out over all the air in a way that caused one to shudder. For a moment, it was equivalent in efficacy to the Demon Extermination Array.

What a shame that the stronger he got, the stronger his counterpart got, too, eventually draining his energy.

At the sixteenth move's arrival, Shuang Ren came out his hand once again, tumbling in a sorry state on the ground. Cheng Qian forced in a breath, swayed unsteadily for a minute, and then fell right into a half-kneel, barely managing to support himself off the ground on his arms.

The man looked down upon him as he held his sword against his neck. "Do you know where you made a mistake?" he asked coldly.

Heartbeat like thunder for a time, Cheng Qian did not respond.

"'Subtlety' is the most difficult move of Fuyao Wooden Sword, unpredictable and all-encompassing. Yours was a load of crap before, but in wink, you've already gotten skilled at it. With that aptitude, why do you prefer to delve into the swordplay of another school? Reckless!"

Were he to have said that his mindset had just been a bit reckless from concern over Yan Zhengming, Cheng Qian would have admitted to it. But, the strenuous effort he had put in for so many years had never been a single bit inferior to anyone else's, and with his new lease on life, he had never been more carefree than anyone else... his natural talent set aside for the time being, he did not regard himself as a reckless person at all.

Thus, he defended himself. "I—"

The corners of the man's mouth lifted up, exposing a stiff smile as he cut him off. "It's because you think that Fuyao Wooden Sword isn't the right path for you, yes? It goes down the 'path of humanity'. From life unto death, from youth unto age, there are millions and millions of average people in this world who cannot break away from this trajectory. There's nothing a bit strange about that. You believe yourself to be an exception that's different from those average people, right?"

"..."

Thinking back on it, when others had been newborn calves unafraid of tigers, still having brilliant and infinite prospects for the future, he had considered himself to have already matured early, and lost his youthful heart. When others had been searching all about, at a loss as to what the path ahead was, he had considered himself to have already been after a clear aim, walking far ahead of them. When others had undergone all sorts of struggles and had things go contrary to their will, he had run amok in the world, long being afraid of nothing. When others had longed for Heavenwards ascent, searching in every way possible yet never receiving what they had wanted, he had willingly walked upon the 'path of humanity'.

He had never bragged about himself, but his self-importance, hidden deep inside his subconsciousness, had caused him to never associate any move of Fuyao Wooden Sword with himself.

The varying swordwills inside the Wooden Sword, in his view, had always been partitioned from him by a layer of something, as if he barely had a surface-level understanding of the lives and luck of others, having never genuinely felt as much before.

“You looked at the Heavens and Earth, then at yourself and at others, yet refused to compare yourself to them. Are you not human? Since you have selected the ‘path of humanity’, why are you unwilling to let go of that impressive, yet impractical mindset towards the Heavens and Earth?”

“How one treats people wholly depends on their closeness and distance. Who they are moved by, who they put up with, who they are close to, who they love... have you ever revered anyone? Looked up to anyone? Taken anyone as an example?”

Speaking up to there, he abruptly pressed the tip of his sword down, its sharp edge painfully cutting Cheng Qian’s neck open. “Teenagers don’t know how big the world is: arrogant, wild, reckless, self-important. I can see that you’re not a teenager, yet your personality hasn’t made much progress from one.”

A coat of cold sweat formed on Cheng Qian’s back.

“If you truly were outstanding and thoroughly comprehended Fuyao Wooden Sword on your own initiative, why can’t you perform even a move such as Subtlety? Stand up!” the man yelled angrily. “Practice isn’t yet concluded! What are you playing dead for?!”

At the very start, his thoughts were difficult to settle, one day elongating into one year. He was not worried about Yan Zhengming being with him here, instead starting to worry about Li Yun and the rest, who were occupying the same area outside as many demonic cultivators and Divination Bureau people were. In a flash, the owner of this space could make out his wandering thoughts in detail, then abused him with strong

winds and vicious rains, forcing him to get rid of his distractions and sink into Fuyao Wooden Sword.

He was confined there for an unknown amount of time, the unnamed owner of the place restricting his true essence uncountable times, forcing him to resemble a young disciple that hadn't yet entered the sect, and making him practice with Shuang Ren as if it was an ordinary wooden sword.

Yet, once the man, transformed into an elderly look again, had pushed open another door to let him go, Cheng Qian suddenly had a strange feeling, like these sunless, moonless happenings had only occurred in the interval of a thought and a breath. As he stood at the other doorway, he looked up to see that a tiny strand of hair, the one that had been cut off of him by the wooden sword before he had entered, was only just now falling to the ground.

He suddenly took a step back, turning his head. "What do you go by, senior?"

"I have no name," the man answered, head lowered. "I am just a spot of inheritance, stored away for you all."

"What would have happened, if we had selected 'Heaven' or 'Earth'?"

"The Fuyao Sect has only ever walked the path of humanity since olden times. I can't teach the paths of the Heaven and Earth. No one can. You would have just been sent back and forth between places."

Hearing this, an idea suddenly streaked past Cheng Qian's mind, too fast for him to catch. He was thoughtful for a short moment, then performed the proper bow of a junior towards the old man, leaving in large strides thereafter.

Behind him, the door to their inheritance silently shut, as if it had never existed in the first place. He raised his head to see Yan Zhengming standing

somewhere not too far away whilst hugging the wooden sword he had extracted from his inner sanctum, his head slightly lowered in contemplation.

As soon as he caught sight of him, Cheng Qian immediately felt pleased, and even his steps were quite brisk. “Senior brother...”

However, right when he spoke, Yan Zhengming’s cold gaze swept over to him, slicing off the latter half of his words.

Cheng Qian had grown up with him since childhood, and could tell the difference between when the other was bored and picking a fight, or moved to real anger. Stunned on the spot, he thought to himself, slightly uneasy, *Did he get harshly tormented by that old man, too?*

After glaring at him, Yan Zhengming turned and walked forward on his own, not making a peep.

With a head full of fog, Cheng Qian followed after him, simultaneously racking his brains to remember when he had ever offended this Young Lord. “What’s going on with you this time?” he asked, exasperated.

The second he said that, he suddenly realized something, himself. His gaze uncontrollably landed upon the wooden sword Yan Zhengming held, scalp going numb. *Wait... what did he take the wooden sword out for?*

The elder inside their inheritance had been sharp-eyed, but he wouldn’t have noticed that he had said something a little too much, right?

Bringing that to mind, Cheng Qian almost started feeling guilty. Soundlessly wiping off a handful of cold sweat, his mind began to come up with a countermeasure.

Yan Zhengming promptly sealed his own lips after hearing this question, thinking, *Ah. That's a guilty conscience.*

Following a long period of waiting, Cheng Qian coughed dryly. Precisely when he went to speak, Yan Zhengming was actually the one to do so first. “What? Have you already composed a lie regarding how to explain this wooden sword?”

“...”

They seemed to have penetrated through a long and narrow passageway, soon arriving at its end, which had a soft halo from the not-yet-bright glimmer of daybreak. Having asked that question, Yan Zhengming directly walked into it without looking back, his figure passing through and vanishing in a flash.

Cheng Qian was quick to chase after him. A pattern burst before his eyes, and then he discovered that he had since returned to the foot of Tai Yin Mountain. Looking back once more, both the Valley of the Heart Demon and any sort of ‘inheritance’ had completely disappeared.

In addition to his fuming senior brother, there were many present. One side was led by Han Yuan, and the entirety of the mob behind him was made of demonic cultivators. The other side was led by You Liang, and behind him was a large batch of ordinary cultivators, which had come to assemble here at some unknown point in time.

Li Yun, Shui Keng, Nian Dada, and the others were unabashedly in the center, floating in the sky.

Cheng Qian was positive that back when the Demon Extermination Array had broken, there had not been this many living, breathing cultivators here.

Could it be that the war between immortals and demons, originally planned for Tai Xing Mountain, had been shifted over here?

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Chapter 87

Upon sighting them, Shui Keng resembled a motherless child that had just found her family again. Completely disregarding the two armies facing off, she hopped down without giving any explanation. “Most senior brother!”

She was wearing bright red, and when she dropped from the sky, the hems of her clothes and tips of her hair appeared to glow with light, as if a ball of eye-cauterizing fire was falling from the Heavens. Everyone’s eyes were drawn to the two that had suddenly come out of nowhere.

The excuse Cheng Qian had been wanting to speak out was successfully stifled.

Han Yuan was sitting high up, cross-legged. He’d had his eyes shut in recuperation without a care. Opening them at the sound, he then sinisterly swept them over the few surrounding demonic cultivators that were looking at Shui Keng covetously. They were scared into piping down out of fear, after which he took back his line of sight, and came into contact with Yan Zhengming’s gaze.

The look in the latter’s eyes was a little complicated. He had always felt complicated towards Han Yuan, forever finding difficulty in dispelling his grudges, but he had also never truly given up on him.

He was, after all... their least prosperous junior brother.

Shui Keng babbled into his ear. “On the day the Array was broken, you two were swept into a crevice. The rest of these annoying people then crawled out of the Demon Extermination Array and started to fight each other for a bit, each of them getting hurt by half. They had to separate into their own areas to catch their breaths, after which there were four... well, the demonic dragon’s qi attracted a lot of demonic cultivators into gathering up here, as

well as that prettyboy sword cultivator. I don't know who he complained to, but a big group of cultivators came from Tai Xing the very next day. They've been facing off for several days now, and the fighting is about to start up really soon."

She loquaciously gabbed out a huge pile of words, tone cheery, watching the excitement with no intention of getting involved in it. Once done, she scouted out Yan Zhengming's sides, then saw Cheng Qian. "Where did you two go off to, senior brother?"

Before he could answer, Yan Zhengming reached out and pulled her away. "Don't speak to him. Let him reflect upon himself for a while."

Hearing as much, Shui Keng sighed flightily, shooting Cheng Qian a look. *How did you irritate him again?*

He could only smile bitterly and shake his head. *I'm ashamed.*

Yan Zhengming motioned at Li Yun, and, not looking at either side of the warfront, found a spot apart from the crowd to sit down on.

One person from the Divination Bureau immediately climbed out of the congregation: Wu Changtian. The instant he caught sight of Yan Zhengming, he couldn't sit still, stepping forth to speak with You Liang.

Unwillingly, the latter stood up and walked towards Yan Zhengming. His injuries still weren't healed, and he wasn't moving that fast, having the pitiful appearance of a stray dog.

Standing steady before Yan Zhengming, he hesitated a bit before speaking in a hushed voice. "This junior will be so bold as to invite you to sit on our side, Senior. All of you will be left high positions."

Yan Zhengming looked at him, and You Liang's back stiffened automatically. Had he met with Sect Leader Yan before this, he would have gone after him in a mind for a fight, but right now, he was inexplicably starting to become fearful of him.

"No need. It's peaceful here," Yan Zhengming answered, indifferent.

Since Nian Mingming had arrived as well, Li Yun had sent Nian Dada off to this father's side. He himself now came down from the sky, then came forth to take over the topic of discussion, smiling at You Liang. "Of us that are present, which one is not restricted by the tremendous power of the Bureau's Demon Elimination Seal? Please pass on a message to Sir Wu, Sir You: there's really no need to be this cautious."

He had concealed a needle within silk. You Liang heard the mockery both inside and out of his words, but he had no way to vie with him, and stood there, stock-still and with no objection, for a good while. He was forced to silently cup his fist, then turn to go.

"Wait," Yan Zhengming suddenly called out.

You Liang stopped in his tracks.

Yan Zhengming did not raise his head. His eyes were glued to the wooden sword he held, as if he was seeing it as a flower. "The path of the sword cultivator has always been harder to walk than others'," he said, taking his time, "but since it's chosen you, that illustrates that you'll at least have that gift when you enter it. You'll always be walking down that road once you're in its door. Walk it well, and you'll be an unmatched sword. Walk it poorly, and you'll be a blade of slaughter. Conduct yourself well; don't allow another to grasp your hilt."

The other was shocked, face paling, but after he took it all in, he bowed his head from afar. "Understood. Thank you, Senior."

Li Yun waited for him to leave, then took the Stone Seed out of his pocket. This time, it wasn't as showy-looking as it had been back at Vermilion Bird Tower; a small shack that shaded and shielded from the wind was constructed on the spot, encircled by blocking curtains with charms upon them. The inside could see and hear the outside, but the outside could not glimpse into the inside.

“What's the situation?” Yan Zhengming asked.

Li Yun very boldly sat beside Cheng Qian. “Wu Changtian is up to his same old crap, and came back to the commoner's world again. He plans to set up a competition here.”

“What competition?” Cheng Qian questioned.

Li Yun signaled with his eyes. “Look at that side. There's people from White Tiger Estate, Black Tortoise Hall, Mulan Mountain, the Western Palace... tsk, tsk. Ever since their ancient Palace Master died, there really hasn't been anyone that can act as their backbone. To be brief, in addition to those two sages that have already ‘come apart from the five elements’, pretty much everyone that's able to fight has come here. Now, look at the demonic side — do you see those people that are flocking around Han Yuan like stars around a moon? There's three women and six men, who are known as the ‘Nine Sages’ of the Nightmare Travelers. They're just demonic cultivators, though, which you've seen many of before. Them cooperating with each other at the onset, then sticking knives into each other after a minute passes, is totally normal. They might not be here to root for Han Yuan, but to stir up the water, just like us.”

“*Who* is stirring up the water?” Yan Zhangming chided, not even turning his head.

Li Yun snickered, supporting his arm on Cheng Qian's shoulder. “These two sides were fighting fervently, no one winning over anyone else, but then,

Wu Changtian ran over from Tai Xing and suggested this competition. He's having several array experts from each side lay down a 'Ten-Party Array' here, and after that, they're going to send in ten people, respectively. Heaven's Will decides who gets matched up with who, and the two will go head to head, disregarding life and death. If the Bureau wins, Han Yuan will come with them, and the Travelers will draw back to Nanjiang, barred from entering the Central Plains for the rest of their lives. If the demonic cultivators win, the Bureau's people will righteously proclaim that in order to bear the sins of the world, they'll abolish their own cultivation base, and allow the demons to punish them."

Upon hearing this, Cheng Qian sensed something amiss. "We're all being constrained by the Demon Elimination Seal, while those demonic cultivators have no loyalty to each other. If the Bureau bribes a couple of them with promises of gains so that they lose on purpose, what fight will they be able to put up?"

"Han Yuan isn't stupid. There ought to be blood oaths made on the demonic side... plus, it won't be one-on-one only. He wasn't afraid to sweep across the Plains by himself, and he never counted on anyone else to help him with that. He might be thinking to get rid of ten opponents by himself in there."

"What are we waiting for now, then?"

"The array probably isn't done yet. Aside from that, they seem to be waiting for a fair judge."

Cheng Qian furrowed his brow.

Li Yun pat him on the shoulder. "Don't frown. Neither you nor our eldest are going anywhere, but at a time like this, I feel like my own cultivation base's mediocrity is pretty good."

“There’s a lot of people watching, and the blood oaths of many are involved. I’m thinking that it’s going to be hard to bring Han Yuan away from this.”

Their few fell quiet for a moment. Right then, Yan Zhengming took out a fan from who-knew-where, and after rapping it absent-mindedly against his own chest, he unconsciously turned his head to witness Li Yun’s improper posture. Thus, he decisively used his fan to smack the other’s arm off. “Sit properly. Have some human decency.”

Thwarted by the bump, Li Yun cackled. Just when he was about to rib him back, he inclined his head to abruptly catch sight of Cheng Qian smiling.

The latter didn’t typically put on many airs, so him smiling wasn’t anything weird. During *this* smile, though, his eyes were constantly on Yan Zhengming, as if he was the only one left in his sights. The corners of his eyes were slightly upturned, and shallow, scattered light looked to be within them, giving them an unprecedented warmth.

“...”

Li Yun looked at Cheng Qian, then at Yan Zhengming. Following a round of fine examination, he believed that if he kept watching them any further, he might just grow sties on his eyes. He shakily sat up straight, thinking to himself, *The Heavens and the Earth switched places around me after just one nap! Fuck!*

Li Yun going silent all of a sudden seemed to make it slightly awkwardly silent. With an inadvertent turn of her head, Shui Keng caught something with her sharp eyes. “Eldest brother, did you switch out your fan? That one’s pretty broken. It’s not as nice to look at as the one you had before.”

Once she mentioned this, everyone noticed that Yan Zhengming had a bamboo-boned fan in hand. Over its many years, its outer skin had turned

an auburn color, and there were little cracks at its corners. It wasn't refined at all.

Yet, Li Yun took the old fan with both of his hands, then carefully spread it out. There were scant brushstrokes to be seen on the back side, which outlined the shape of a distant mountain. The front side was a white expanse that only had one seal stamped onto the corner, in the very likely characters for 'Fuyao'.

With just one look at that name, one would know that the stamp had come from the Sect Leader Seal.

Li Yun exhaled. "This... this is a relic of the sect. I say, junior sister, you're a big girl, and should really be studying seriously. Your heart doesn't have a drop of ink on it, and all you know to do from morning 'til night is spread chicken feathers everywhere as you fly around at random... ah, you really worry me to death. Where did you get this from, most senior brother? Try dripping blood on it later. It might have developed a spirit."

Yan Zhengming explained in simple, downplayed terms the inheritance he and Cheng Qian had encountered behind the Tower of No Regrets, then proceeded to take out a small box and ancient book from his Bag of Hoarding.

He handed the wooden box to Shui Keng. "This is a yao pill from some generation's Yao King, who had lived for three-thousand, six-hundred years before dying of age. The pill is pure, and can pass on power. When it comes to yao cultivators, they have non-stop internal struggles, so Kings living to old age are rare. The Fuyao sect's successive generations were only able to obtain this one pill; keep it, and don't secretly eat it for yourself. There's over three thousand years of Daoist practice inside it. Your bones are not fully grown, you might not be able to endure it."

Shui Keng looked like she could not orient herself, eyes soon about to open to eyebrow-line. Resembling a stingy, destitute soul that had caught sight of a house full of gold, she held up her worshipping hands in a begging posture, as if she was holding up her dream of turning into a great yao. She stuttered for a good while, then incoherently babbled out some boot-lickery. “S-Senior brother... I have seen the greatness of Mount Tai, yet failed to recognize it! That fan is r-really beautiful... so beautiful, I’m drunk on it!”

“Quit it. You’re an embarrassment to look at.” With that, Yan Zhengming tossed the book into Li Yun’s hands. “This is yours.”

The other accepted it merrily, then saw the words ‘Ninth Chain’ written on its cover. He flipped it open. After skimming only a few pages, his entire body was trembling out of excitement. “This... this is...”

“I questioned that Senior,” Yan Zhengming said. “He said that in the ancestral line of our sect, there was indeed one individual that was particularly unsuccessful. They could not perform alchemy, craftsmanship, the sword, or martial arts, instead specially delving into all sorts of bizarre skillsets. This pedigree of cultivators is very rarely seen, and are known as the ‘Ninth Chain’. We’ve had no Master these years, no one to guide you onto this road, so you’ve been groping about blind by yourself. Now that you have this, you’ll be able to get twice the results with half the effort.”

“I’m going to devote my life to you, brother,” Li Yun said, hot tears filling his eyes.

Sect Leader Yan glanced at him with his peach blossom eyes — which could talk to no one, only scold — in a clear conveyance of his contempt. *I wouldn’t even want your money.*

Cheng Qian kind of didn’t know how to react. He had been worried that that elder had given Yan Zhengming a hard time, not expecting that he

would have actually been given pointers to get out of a conundrum, and material things... Sect Leaders really did get special treatment.

Li Yun stroked the old book he held lovingly. "Did that Senior say anything else?" he asked, inquisitive.

Had he said anything else?

"The origin of the sword in your inner sanctum is quite intriguing. In order to attach a swordwill to its surface, someone has cut its primordial spirit to act as a vector, which happened to allow you to turn your poor fortune into good fortune, walk 'into the scabbard' in one go, then truly rise into the 'Sword Spirit Realm' afterwards. However, as I see it, even though that humanized sword is amenable to lowering itself and is very cunning, your attainments in the wooden sword are not high. If you want to take a further step, you must refine your swordwill properly."

Once he remembered this, Yan Zhengming's hands faintly trembled. He glared malevolently at Cheng Qian.

"Quell your anger, senior brother," the latter whispered, gathering in close.

Yan Zhengming flung his hand off, not making a peep.

Cheng Qian was only able to wound people with his sharp mouth and teeth, not coax them with smooth words and a silver tongue. After watching him helplessly for a spell, he cautiously held Yan Zhengming's hand.

It got flung off again.

Just as unflinching as he claimed himself to be, Cheng Qian chiseled away at his goal by grasping the back of his hand once more.

Shui Keng didn't know to avoid taboo. Following a minute of staring fixedly at them from nearby, she got the overall feeling that something was wrong.

Li Yun lowered his head, putting them out of sight, out of mind. All of a sudden, he discovered something stuffed between the pages of Ninth Chain, and when he gently opened it up, he saw that there was a piece of paper. The ink marks on it were fresh, and in Yan Zhengming's handwriting. It said: "Make this thing up, then give me a portion of it."

The page the note was on happened to be in the pill volume. The section for a 'heart-purging pill' hit Li Yun in the eyes.

Its annotation read: "By ingesting this pill, one's heart and essence will be purged, the seven emotions cut away from and six desires cleaned away. From then on, there will be no love, nor hatred, nor any concern about the mortal realm. Cultivation will come before all."

Li Yun's heart jumped fiercely. With a chest full of doubts, he raised his head to look Yan Zhengming, who was wrangling with Cheng Qian.

Right at that time, a sudden burst of furor came from within the crowd. A flock of Bureau people was seen to stand up in succession, immediately after which a carriage with flying horses came down from the sky. A familiar person lifted the vehicle's curtain and jumped down — Liu Lang.

After disembarking, he bent at the waist with his hands making a step in front of him, respectfully allowing the one still inside to step on them. Said person was not a surprise — Tang Zhen.

Tang Zhen ought to have already switched bodies. His complexion looked a lot better, and his originally slightly-grayed hair was entirely black.

Upon getting off, his gaze swept around his surroundings, at Wu Changtian's group cupping their hands, then at the looks in the eyes of Mulan Mountain's group being pretty unnatural. Meanwhile, Black Tortoise Hall's people were standing uniformly at the clear other end; evidently, they still remembered that the others once had an altercation with them at the Immortal Binding Platform. Others — such as the large group of wandering cultivators or those from smaller sects, like Nian Mingming — stepped forth to greet him one after the other, some calling him 'Brother Tang', some 'Senior'.

Quickly after that, he turned towards the demonic cultivators. Strangely, of the Nine Sages therein, three of them cupped their hands, greeting him from afar.

The man hadn't had much contact with those famed sects, but the wide range of connections he had amidst the smaller ones could make one gasp in astonishment. No wonder he knew a little of everything.

A whistle came from the distance, which was the Bureau's signal. After hearing it, Wu Changtian stepped forward to speak. "All my fellow Daoists have been invited, and the Array has now been completed. Please verify it, Mr. Tang."

Tang Zhen sent his spiritual consciousness out to cover the place. Following a short moment, he opened his eyes and nodded, giving no sort of comment.

Wu Changtian glanced at Han Yuan. "Pardon me, Mr. Tang. Can you bring out the blood-oath plate?"

Liu Lang quickly drew out a plate from a small bundle, took two paces forward, and wordlessly released it. It stayed there, suspended in midair.

Tang Zhen looked down, sighing. "Must this be so? Ah, well. Make your oaths, you two."

Wu Changtian was delighted. Four fingers put together, his hand pointed up at the sky, expression dull. “Today, my Bureau bears the Demon Elimination Seal, uniting our fellow Daoists from all directions in a battle against the Nightmare Travelers and demonic dragon. If our group loses, everyone in the Bureau will destroy our own cultivation bases, allow them to punish us, and never enter the door of immortality!”

With that, he forced out a cluster of blood drops from his fingertip, letting them fall onto the plate.

Shui Keng silently morphed into a bird, then flew into the sky to scout out what was going on. She saw a [diagram of the Supreme Ultimate](#) pictured in the middle of the plate, Wu Changtian’s blood seamlessly dying half of it red.

Wu Changtian shook out his sleeve. “It’s your turn, Daoist Han.”

Without even lifting his eyelids, Han Yuan reached out, then made a motion with his hand. The plate came directly flying over to be right in front of him. “If we lose, I’ll go with you, and they’ll beat it back to Nanjiang, shrinking back into their shells for a lifetime.”

Saying so, he lowered his head, ruthlessly bit his own finger open, and forcefully pressed the bloodied digit upon the Supreme Ultimate plate. A hissing sound was heard as it appeared to suck in his blood, instantly sucking out a concave area onto his finger. The other half of the Supreme Ultimate was immediately crammed full of dense, black blood.

The plate began to spin at rapid speed. Just from watching it, Shui Keng felt a little dizzy, so she had to shift her sights away.

The next moment, numerous diagrams of the Supreme Ultimate, suffused with the color of blood, broke away from the plate. A mark was left behind on each of the wrists of the people in the Bureau, Han Yuan, and the Nine

Sages. With the oath completed, its violators would indubitably be met with backlash.

Han Yuan looked at the mark indifferently, put his still-bleeding finger into his mouth, and licked the bloodstains off of it. “It’ll be these nine, plus me.”

Wu Changtian waved his hand. A few young Bureau workers stepped out from behind him, carrying scrolls. He selected one of them himself, and the others dispersed into the crowd, going towards those they had selected.

One of the scroll-holders was heading right for where the Fuyao Sect was. Grabbing Cheng Qian’s elbow, Yan Zhengming whispered, “Go get that.”

This was not some stranger that was bringing a scroll, but Zhe Shi, who had infiltrated the Bureau.

Knowing that Zhe Shi had to be sending information back, Cheng Qian immediately understood, then moved aside the Stone Seed’s curtain to welcome him.

The instant he left, Li Yun quickly gathered in close to Yan Zhengming and pulled at his ear while he shot question after question at him. “What do you mean by this? What’s going on with you and Xiao Qian? What do you want a heart-purging pill for? Did you take the wrong meds? What are you doing this time?!”

Yan Zhengming caressed the wooden sword he held with both hands. “Do you know that he damaged his own primordial spirit for this sword?” he asked, hushed.

Li Yun went mute for a moment. “Ah... that seems like something he would do. So, your reciprocation for that is to be a fickle ingrate?” he questioned dryly.

“No... it’s just in case. I mean, it’s just in case this all hinders his cultivation practice one day. If he has regrets, I’ll give the pill to him. I can’t be something that gets in his way.”

Aside from a cold laugh, Li Yun simply had nothing to respond to him with. “Most senior brother, I always used to think that you were a fop. I never noticed that you were actually a Sage of Love.”

“Be less sarcastic.” Yan Zhengming smacked him away, irascible. “Don’t tell him about this. The novelty he feels hasn’t passed yet, and he’s far from being fed up with me. I’m afraid that he won’t be happy if he finds out.”

“By my estimate, he won’t *just* be unhappy when he knows,” Li Yun said. “He’ll also make you go eat shit. Do you not trust him, senior brother?”

Chapter 88

Yan Zhengming sighed. He turned to look back, seeing through the Stone Seed, and caught sight of bird-Shui Keng perched on Cheng Qian's shoulder out of curiosity. The two were in the middle of taking the Bureau scrolls, having no intention of returning for right now.

He lowered his head, slightly closed his eyes, and pinched the bridge of his nose, as if extremely fatigued.

His features had been delicate since childhood, and made him look like he had walked out of a painting. Yet, with this shut of the eyes, he no longer did; he just looked like a stone statue.

A stream amongst the mountains trickled down in spring. The flora's perfume on either shore of it all practically turned into mist.

Coming to autumn, the water level lowered, and traces of rocks were exposed to the surface.

"What did Xiao Qian say to you in the Valley of the Heart Demon?" Li Yun asked.

Yan Zhengming's expression lightly drifted away.

"Ahh." The other understood at once, using a vulgar and blatant gaze to immorally look Yan Zhengming up and down. "Ah, Sect Leader, you don't need to keep playing innocent when you've gotten what you want. You've really never come across good luck in your lifetime, only getting your wishes fulfilled every once in while. I can tell that you're pleased..."

He paused there, pondered for a short while, then quickly thought up a figure of speech that he believed to be most accurate. "...and pissing

yourself in fear.”

“...”

As someone obsessed with cleanliness, Yan Zhengming could put up with Li Yun being all sorts of worthless, but he absolutely could not tolerate the tramp associating such indecent vocabulary with him. For a second, he felt that his own tongue would be dirtied by this guy’s speech, so he went straight to violence.

“Hold it!” Li Yun raised a hand to cover his head with, dodged to the left and the right as he folded up the slip of paper that was stained by fresh ink, then carefully stowed it away in his lapels. Once done, he took in a deep breath and pat himself on the chest in full contentment, looking like he had received a life-saving talisman.

“Trying to hit me?” he huffed. “You need to think carefully about what you do, Sect Leader. I’ve now got a handle on you. You’ll have to remember from now on to always be a little nicer to me, else if you’re not careful, you’ll scare my weak heart, and — oops! This slip might just get shown to Xiao Qian!”

What was the use of keeping a junior like this around?

I might as well fatten him up a little, then kill him for the meat on New Year’s, Yan Zhengming evilly thought.

Cheng Qian knew not a thing of the violent undercurrents surging between those two. He had accepted the scrolls from Zhe Shi, who was pretending that they had never met before, and was momentarily conflicted.

Zhe Shi had learned via various channels that Cheng Qian had come back from the dead, but this was the first time he had seen him in person in so very long.

He offered up two scrolls with both hands. After looking at Cheng Qian for a short moment, his eyes suddenly went red while his back was turned to the others. Soon after, he took a step back, then cupped his hands and bent his waist in a deep bow. When he raised his head once more, he had resumed his tranquil blankness.

Owing to Yan Zhengming having been exceptionally difficult to serve when young, Zhe Shi had been exceptionally meticulous amongst the many Daolings. Cheng Qian recalled that the other hadn't spoken much, nor had he been as personable as Xue Qing, doing all his tasks in an orderly manner and having little presence. His looks hadn't even changed all that much over the years. It seemed like only yesterday that he had been following their most senior brother, pouring tea and polishing seats, but now... he was already a different person.

Cheng Qian collectedly stowed one scroll Zhe Shi had stuffed into his hands into his sleeve. Maintaining his persistently unreasonable look, he unfurled the other scroll — its surface was empty as air, with only a sizable Demon Elimination Seal upon it.

The Bureau had sent over two scrolls, which was saying that Fuyao was to send out two people.

Cheng Qian showcased a cold sneer with difficulty. “Your faction’s Sir Wu really doesn’t skimp out on the slightest detail when it comes to tallying people up. He won’t let even one fish slip the net.”

At that moment, an urgent burst of drums was heard coming from not too far away. At the foot of Tai Yin, a human-made barrier suddenly rose up, resembling a mountain that had been drawn out of nowhere.

The Ten-Party Array!

“My fellow Daoists that have received the Demon Elimination Seal,” Wu Changtian’s raised voice came, “please take a temporary rest and join the array in the night, at the time of the Rat!^(11p-1a) Over here, please, Mr. Tang.”

By the time Cheng Qian and Shui Keng returned to the Stone Seed, Yan Zhengming and Li Yun had each put on unruffled faces.

As soon as he saw that Cheng Qian was back, Yan Zhengming took the initiative in greeting him. “Xiao Qian, come here.”

Cheng Qian looked at him in suspicion, wondering if the other had done something disgraceful. Why else would that recent coaxing have not gone smoothly, yet he was now being friendly on his own accord?

Fortunately, it was currently not the time to fret over trivial stuff, so Cheng Qian didn’t go after him.

Zhe Shi had passed him two thumbings. Li Yun took them, then felt along their edges, soon finding the hidden mechanism on one of them. Gently breaking it open, the ring split from the middle.

The object had been designed elaborately. After it was flipped over, the inner wall was seen to be inlaid with a small mirror.

Li Yun exhaled, soon swiping it with his hand. The mirror gave off its own light, shadows appearing to flash past inside it, so he quickly found a piece of [xuan paper](#) and allowed the mirror’s light to fall right onto its white surface. A column of handwriting came into being amidst the rays. “Someone’s done something...”

The words on the surface blinked successive columns in and out of existence. Linking them up, it went: *Someone’s done something. When I made inventory of the array’s spiritual stones, I found that they weren’t in*

line with the regular consumption of a Ten-Party Array, but mysteriously less. I couldn't find out who did it, and there's no signs of other arrays in the area. The one that did the tampering likely didn't do it just for those worthless stones; they've either secretly modified the array, or have made further arrays nearby, but my cultivation base is too low to detect them. This person's secret methods are the type seen only once in a lifetime. Additionally, Wu Changtian has someone amongst the Nine Sages of the Nightmare Travelers. I don't know who it is. Open the hidden mirror on the thumbing after entering the array, and you'll be able to see the environs outside upon it. This is a hasty warning, and I've omitted a lot of details. Take caution, by all means.

The Ten-Party Array had been laid out by both sides, and it would have never been possible for the Bureau to bribe every single demonic cultivator, with the two keeping watch on each other. Tang Zhen, the impartial party, had even verified it after the fact. There had not been much leeway for tampering with the array.

“An array outside of the array is the most likely probability, then...” Li Yun furrowed his brow. “But, this is weird. If the righteous path gets the ultimate win, wouldn't the outer array be useless? If the demonic cultivators win, then the instant that array strikes against them, the Bureau will have violated the blood oath, and violators suffer tenfold backlash. Wouldn't that just be injuring a thousand enemies, only to lose eight hundred yourself? Unless... the outer array isn't meant to go after the demonic cultivators at all.”

If it wasn't meant for them, then it was obviously meant for some other party.

Yan Zhengming used his ancient fan to lightly tap against the white sheet. “Toss a bunch of cultivators whose eyes are red with murder into an array, let them fight out who lives and who dies, and the one that wins in the end

will come out, only to get hit in the face with being bound to the inside of the outer array. I feel like this scenario sounds familiar.”

“How so?” Shui Keng asked.

“It’s like gu-raising.”

She immediately shuddered. She was a bird, yet feared bugs — a truly unique quality. She rubbed at the goosebumps that were showing up on her skin. “But isn’t Wu Changtian going in it, too? Do they not care about him?”

“The Divination Bureau’s internal factions fight like black-eyed chickens. They might not be from the same side of power.” Cheng Qian crossed his arms in front of his chest. “That means preparations need to be made to break another array... I only have superficial knowledge of the array’s making. It’s too complicated for me to understand clearly.”

“Don’t look at me,” Yan Zhengming said. “I don’t understand it, either.”

Li Yun forcefully grabbed his own hair. “I could actually... ugh, but I’d be outside the array. There’s no way I could help.”

“That’s easy to deal with. Do you still have any Toad Liquid? If you take a bowl of it yourself, I could bring you with by hiding you in my sleeve.”

After saying that, though, Yan Zhengming appeared to imagine a scene where he was carrying around a toad, and suddenly changed his mind.

“Nevermind. Xiao Qian could bring you with.”

Li Yun grinned nastily and beat his own chest.

“...” Yan Zhengming threatened him with his eyes, face unchanging, then egged him on. “Fine. If you really don’t want to, think up some other way.”

The other got serious. “Even though I can’t go in, there’s someone who can.”

The second he said that, there was no need to make a clarifying statement; everyone else knew that that someone who would be in the array, and was also knowledgeable of its making, could only be Han Yuan.

Cheng Qian went quiet for a minute. “That seems to not be... *impossible*, but we likely won’t be able to meet up with him.”

Han Yuan might not be willing to collaborate, but, in everyone’s hearts, he was still trustworthy. Even if he wasn’t affiliated with the same team, he was still one of them.

Yan Zhengming lightly sighed. “Take everything you all have out.”

Potent talismans, medicines, night pearls, directional insects, and other such things, as well as the True Dragon Flag, were quickly heaped into a heap all at once.

Yan Zhengming took inventory, explained in detail how to use a few of the rare items to Cheng Qian, and then became a bit fretful; this event might not cost them a home-breaking fortune, but it would still be a good deal of blood paid. They likely wouldn’t be able to make the Bureau compensate them, either.

“If we lose this much in property again, we’ll have nothing,” he speculated. “Once this is done and over with, let’s use the chaos to reap profits.”

He was a proper sword cultivator, yet was preoccupied with money from morning ’til night. It left an uncannily bitter taste in the mouth.

In a wink, the time of the Rat arrived.

Heavily exposed to the deep of night, the Ten-Party Array looked even more mystical.

Han Yuan was the first to stand. An enraged black dragon was seen to flash behind him, leaving its long, serpentine shadow upon the ground. In an instant, all of the fires surrounding him were thoroughly extinguished, which terrified the cultivators. Half of his face was immersed in shadow, and he tilted his head with an arrogant smile, unspeakably untamed.

The Nine Sages followed him. The group of demonic cultivators, united in appearance yet divided in minds, entered the array.

People on the outside could not see the inside of the Ten-Party Array, only the two rows of candles at its entrance, which summed up to twenty from both sides.

In the wake of them going in, one side of ten candles abruptly lit up. Their heavy metal bases were instantly inundated with black qi, reflecting upon the lifelike, carved [panlongs](#) on their bodies, looking extremely malicious. The black qi rushed right up to the Heavens.

Winds were strong in mountains at night, yet the candles' flames only appeared to grow. Disregarding any gust, they didn't move a bit, somehow generating a slight feeling of eeriness.

The righteous cultivators with scrolls then walked out. This bunch had divided minds, but *no* appearance of unity, each one indifferent-looking. Not glancing at Wu Changtian, who was keeping watch before the array, they walked in by themselves in a single file line.

As they went inside, one after the other, the other row of candles also successively lit up. This side was comparatively simpler, appearing as ordinary white candles standing crookedly in a line, the spitting image of funerary condolences being giving to someone.

Right as Cheng Qian was about to step in, Yan Zhengming suddenly caught him. “Wait.”

After that, he raised his hand, pulled the old hair ribbon off of Cheng Qian’s head, and drew a new one out of his sleeve. After that, in the same way an ordinary mortal would, he held the ribbon in his teeth, combed his fingers through the other’s hair, gathered it together, and tied it up. Not a trace of the puppet charm’s aura showed through.

Yan Zhengming looked at him for a minute. The impulse to hug him was bubbling up in his heart, but since this was a public area, he was forced to quietly take his hands back. “As I see it, the internal doorway of the array might not go to just one place. After we enter, there’s a possibility that no one will be able to find anyone. Be a little bit more careful... what are you looking at? Do you even know how well I’m treating you right now? How about you anger me a couple times less from now on?”

As he watched him, Cheng Qian was purely thinking that he was a nag, and knew that if he kept going on like this, Queen Mother Yan was soon going to turn into just Mother Yan.

...But, for the sake of not further infuriating their most senior brother, he very smartly said nothing.

When they both passed Wu Changtian by without even a side glance, the latter called out to Yan Zhengming. “Please wait a moment, Sect Leader Yan.”

Yan Zhengming turned his head to him, raising one eyebrow. His bamboo fan whirled around in his hand. “What advice do you have?” he asked, smiling falsely.

“My junior brother, You Liang, has been studying hard without rest ever since the day he started down the path of the sword. He has never dared to

slack off for a single moment, nor has he ever encountered messy affairs such as these before, and is still youthful in nature... if you find his aptitude to be acceptable, Sect Leader Yan, when this Wu is martyred, could I trouble you with the thankless task of instructing him on my behalf?"

Yan Zhengming actually did have something of a good impression towards that young, brainless sword cultivator, as ones with primordial spirits for said cultivation path were uncommon, after all. Sans his own brand of bizarreness, most of them were staunchly wise and rarely had distracting thoughts.

Even so, he did not display that tiny spot of favor, simply answering coldly. "When did the Fuyao Sect become a trash collector? Besides, our tiny, run-down settlement would never dare to dip its fingers into your Bureau's brilliant disciples. Isn't Gu Yanxue's end not a lesson from our forebears?"

Saying so, he looked at Wu Changtian no longer, tugging at Cheng Qian. "Let's go."

The latter couldn't resist looking further at Wu Changtian, though. Cultivators would label the end of their lives as 'falling', or, similar to mortals, with terms like 'death', 'no longer being of the mortal world', and so on. The word 'martyred' was not heard much.

He felt it rather unusual.

Cheng Qian had clearly been following right behind Yan Zhengming, but after entering the Ten-Party Array, they were nowhere to be seen to each other. As the latter had anticipated, its internal entryway did not open up to just one area.

It was so quiet inside the array, he could hear his own pulse. Its layout resembled a coffin with one large end and one small end; ghastly, with all of

its walls bare. A long, narrow path led through to somewhere unknown, the space before him black and cavernous.

He secured Shuang Ren, advancing onward.

All of sudden, there was a glint in the darkness. He stopped in his tracks, seeing what appeared to be a humanoid figure standing there in silence.

Was a demonic cultivator already waiting here?

Frowning, he held his fist before his chest, politely cupping his hands. The person didn't make a peep, cupping their hands at him in the same motion. He calmly swept his spiritual consciousness outward — no one was there.

Cautiously, he took a few steps forward, yet the entire walkway echoed with his steps alone, making one's scalp automatically go numb. He made a hand sign, and then a cluster of cold flames hovered about a cun above his fingers, quickly illuminating his surroundings.

He saw a mirror in the other corner.

It was unclear what it was made of, but it was completely different from typical bronze ones. That human figure was almost wholly manifested therein. Cheng Qian had rarely peered into mirrors, let alone ever gotten such a detailed look at himself.

The mirror-person held a cluster of flames in hand, as well. The mirror's surface did not distribute light like a normal bronze one; the features of the mirror-person were familiar upon first glance, yet also slightly not, upon detailed analysis.

But why was there a mirror here?

In the middle of his confusion, the mirror-person suddenly moved on their own!

‘He’ slowly lifted his head, smiling at Cheng Qian. The corners of ‘his’ slightly sharp and thin lips raised upwards, looking quite ill-intentioned, while there were no smile lines at the edges of ‘his’ gently upturned eyes, gaze like a secluded pond.

“...”

This was the first time he was learning that he could be so creepy.

Despite his alarm, he drew Shuang Ren without delay, and slashed at the mirror.

The mirror-person suddenly jumped out from its surface. ‘His’ height, outfit... and even that small wound the Demon Extermination Array had left on his neck were all exactly the same as his own!

What was even worse was that ‘he’ was holding a matching Shuang Ren!

The mirror behind the mirror-person shattered into fragments, yet ‘his’ movements were not the least bit hindered.

Which of the Nine Sages was this? What was this weird technique?

The next instant, two swords that were no different from each other collided in midair, producing a screeching sound that made one’s teeth ache. Even their styles looked like the same master had taught them!

Still, with this exchange, Cheng Qian was calm at heart. He had calculated the depths of the one before him via the blow, and they were inferior to him; his style had been only superficially imitated, and their swordwills weren’t at all the same kind, which illustrated that the odd mirror really was

a demonic cultivator's trick. This person had only appropriated a layer of his skin.

Following the mirror-person getting knocked back by the strike, they staggered for a moment, then collapsed to the ground. Coldly looking askance at him, they appeared as a very distorted Cheng Qian due to the black qi lingering about their refined appearance. He intended to rush in and finish this to get the matter completely done with, but his environment suddenly started lighting up.

Surrounding him on all sides were several neatly-arranged rows of frameworks that were covered by black cloths. Immediately after this, all the cloths simultaneously fell down, revealing the frameworks to actually be around a dozen full-body mirrors that were reflecting each other. This was far from good — countless reflections of Cheng Qian were being made within them!

He felt a tingling on his scalp, then heard a gurgling noise, as if something was coming out of water. A huge group of people that were identical to him, and carrying swords in the mirrors, shortly walked out of those mirrors, and they *kept* coming out, instantly weaving up a sea of people around him.

“...”

This demonic cultivator should have gone up against Yan Zhengming! Maybe this would have cured him of his terrible condition of loving nothing other than embracing his own reflection in the mirror!

Chapter 89

Dozens of swords pressed down from every direction, all using the same exact maneuver he had just done. The coffin-like area instantly iced up due to the frost, a pressuring chill flowing outward.

Cheng Qian inwardly grumbled that this was annoying, Shuang Ren in hand as he crouched.

Tide Swordplay — Against Crazy Waves.

Swordwill swept over the skyful of fake frost. An invisible barrier seemed to build in midair, imperviously blocking the repressive might of those tens of swords. Following a tremendously loud sound, sparks burst forth, and the mirror-people with swords dispersed together in retreat.

He didn't give them the chance to encircle him, figure like lightning. Shuang Ren revolved without cease in his hand, the nine changes of Subtlety lashing out and stabbing in turn, the sword's image like an unfathomable monster, quickly boring into the crowd.

The mirror-people were too densely packed together, momentarily unable to come near him because they were impeding each other.

He made a sudden leap, then reached out to pass his hand over Shuang Ren, appearing to casually grab a handful of sword qi. Upon waving his hand in a circle, the surfaces of the dozen or so mirrors noisily shattered at the same time, and each of them spat out a cloud of black smoke that rapidly condensed in the air.

Right as he was about to sort this black shadow out, the many mirror-people that no longer had homes to return to went collectively nuts the instant the mirrors shattered, following which they recklessly went to surround him

once more. One of the bodies, cut in half by Shuang Ren, was still restlessly wrangling with him.

This event happened to bar his way, and with another look, that black qi had already vanished.

Due to the unforgivingness of the mirror-people, the present scene began to turn very bloody. Over no more than a few brief breaths, Cheng Qian had already seen himself without a head, himself without arms, himself missing half of his body, himself disemboweled... and all sorts of other images of dying unwhole.

Thankfully, he was a heartless chunk of Spirit-Collecting Jade. Were he to be swapped out for a human with fragile innards, they might have stared crying out of fear.

Right as he was getting tangled up with a lot of mirror-people, the recently-vanished black qi slipped down into a corner, then burrowed into a palm-sized mirror placed there. Its surface momentarily brightened, then faded, revealing a smiling face with black qi curling about it.

Cheng Qian dispatched dozens of mirror-people like grass. The blood splashing onto his face was warm and fishy, like actual human blood.

With no change in expression, he nailed the final mirror-person to the ground, Shuang Ren's frigid qi coating 'him' in a fine layer of white frost. The mirror-person opened those eyes that were identical to his, a cunning smile faintly looking to be within 'his' callousness. He was about to get goosebumps from that grin.

At that very moment, a cluster of black qi suddenly spurted out of the tiny mirror he had overlooked, and he was shrouded within something fishnet-like that pelted down upon his head. It was unknown what evil path the qi

had come from, but it seemed to seep into the cracks in his bones, firmly locking up each of his joints.

Cheng Qian maintained the position he had of pinning the mirror-person to the ground, unable to budge even a bit.

A ball of fuzzy black shadows darted out from behind him, and he heard the voice of a man that was neither dark, nor light. “Oh? You’re an ace from the Fuyao Sect. I recognize that ‘sword of terrible death’.”

While he spoke, a pale hand reached in front of Cheng Qian and timidly glanced across Shuang Ren, as if fearful of something, then retracted, the man sucking in cold air.

“As expected. You’re not a typical note, Brother Cheng,” he whispered with a smile. “I heard that you made a big scene in Zhaoyang City all by yourself, and killed the Merriment Sect’s Chief. When all the Sect’s pervs heard, they hollered to take revenge on you.”

The black qi that had penetrated into Cheng Qian’s body jumped up and down in the presence of the demonic cultivator’s hand. The latter seemed to sense that the critical moment was about here, and his greedy gaze swept over Cheng Qian. “This body’s cultivation base... will all be given to me through your mirror image!”

With that, he yanked on the big, black-qi-woven net, as if he was going to draw the other’s primordial spirit out of his body...

Yet, that yank moved nothing. The cultivator’s face morphed. “What?!”

He saw a bunch of frost speedily spread out from the end of the net. Cheng Qian, who had been unable to move, raised his hand, then pulled the whole thing off of himself. The frozen net floated in his hand like it weighed nothing.

“You heard of me making a scene in Zhaoyang,” he said softly, “but did you never hear... that I’m not made of flesh and blood?”

Before the cultivator could realize what he meant by that, the net was gathered together by Cheng Qian, then suddenly transformed into a whip, lashed out right at the other’s face. The demon was greatly alarmed, turning around, changing into a ball of black qi, and floating away, instantly a few paces apart once he landed.

Still, the swordwill of Shuang Ren was like gangrene attached to the bones, impossible to shake off. Its sinister killing aura did not draw back, especially frightening within the corpses that filled the ground with gore.

The cultivator fled in a panic, but a beam of swordlight ‘bored’ out from an utterly bizarre location, immediately opening a huge rift on the front of his chest and nearly injuring something vital. He sucked in cold air. In the subsequent instant, a million Shuang Rens rushed up around him, securely trapping him inside them.

He quickly looked back to see that Cheng Qian looked as calm as a thousand-year-old pond of ice — something that reflections could never imitate.

He resembled those of legendarily high power that soared right up to a higher realm; toppling mountains, splitting earth, and having no sorrows, nor joys.

Knowing himself to be in a dead end, the demonic cultivator’s face turned vicious. His sleeves were seen to swell, and black qi surged upwards, turning his entire person into a huge black cask.

Cheng Qian was not one specialized in eliminating demons and defending the Dao, so the amount of demonic cultivators he had exchanged blows with was ultimately limited. He had never seen such a technique before, and

by the time he reacted, it was too late — the man forced his demonic qi into his own flesh, and then his physical body instantly exploded, the sword copies surrounding him all immediately blowing up, too. The wall blockades constructed all around the Ten-Party Array were consequently sullied with meat and blood that was suffused with raven-colored qi, splatters sounding out.

Shuang Ren hummed. Cheng Qian quickly withdrew, thinking to himself, *Hell no. If this puppet charm breaks again, Yan Zhengming is definitely going to nag me to death.*

Yet, the next moment, that weird ear shape suddenly showed up in his palm. His environment shined with snowy light, stinging his eyes so that he couldn't open them for a minute. When he could see again, the demonic cultivator's viscera had been entirely cleared away. Most such cultivators had possession techniques; abandoning the corporeal form to get their primordial spirit into another body was a tried and tested thing.

Unfortunately, this one had ended up kicking an immovable iron sheet, his primordial spirit unable to escape. After a shriek, he was encased in the white rays, crying out in full dread. "Hear the Uni—"

Following that, there was quiet once more, his soul having promptly flown away and scattered.

Cheng Qian stood there, mystified. He saw the 'ear' he held, which had appeared at some unknown time, dim down after it finished its strike, then quickly vanish into his skin, as if it had never existed.

Hear the Uniforms? Hear the Unity... or, Hear some other crap?[\[2\]](#)

He had believed it to be an ordinary, spiritual, array-making object, not expecting that the hidden function of it would be so major. He inwardly

decided that once this was done with, he would ask Li Yu or Tang Zhen for more details.

He cracked open the thumbing that Zhe Shi had given him, then peered through the internal mirror to the outside. He saw that amongst the two rows of candles, the white candles and panlong candles representing the demonic cultivators each had one extinguished. After such a brief time, one person from both had already died.

As it was, he had been the quickest to act.

He stared at the extinguished white candle for a short moment, having no idea which perished great power had been involved in it. Cultivation practice was forever difficult; luck, natural talent, diligence, and comprehension were all indispensable for it, and it took hundreds of thousands of years just to finish one primordial soul... only to die like this?

All of a sudden, he was a fox mourning a rabbit's death, aching at seeing the fate of someone in the same lot.

He clicked the thumbing back together, then proceeded to walk forward. *I have no idea what's going on with Yan Zhengming, either.*

They had been apart for no more than a short moment, yet he was already starting to worry. Upon realizing that, he couldn't help but smile bitterly in self-mockery. "Is this what they call a day of not seeing someone being akin to three autumns of separation?"

All at once, a spurt of dense fog tossed itself into the Ten-Party Array. Snapping back to his senses, he was teleported elsewhere in the blink of an eye.

His mind quickly spun in thought, speculating, *Right. A white candle had gone out, meaning a demonic cultivator killed their opponent, just like me.*

Could it be that I'll have to face them next?

Right as he landed on ground, a current of overwhelming, omnipresent demonic qi swept towards him. Once Shuang Ren was unsheathed, it practically brought a dragon's roar along with it, and he solidly shoved out the steel-in-silk move of 'Seek and Pursue'. He seemed to hit something huge inside the darkness.

At the same time, the spiritual consciousness he had released collided overhead with another one that was tyrannical and sturdy. His heart suddenly jolted; disregarding all else, he snapped out a slender flame from his fingers, lighting up a range of about ten zhang around.

The figure of a black dragon was seen to land, then transform into a familiar human, who stood at a moderate distance of ten paces away.

Han Yuan.

They stood in a deadlock for a moment.

Cheng Qian hadn't expected that he would run into him so soon, speechless for a time. He pondered for a bit over how he ought to open his mouth and break the deadlock, while also automatically remembering for a bit the white candle that had just gone out.

He suddenly realized that Han Yuan had walked down this path ever since his horizon-covering display at Vermilion Bird Tower. Had any of his steps *not* been stained with human blood?

Would those burdened with the debts of blood from their teachers and peers ever let them go?

Han Yuan was the first to speak. "I was saying that I would be waiting for ages to meet the next person. Your decisiveness in cutting people down is

really no lesser than us infamous Nightmare Travelers, little senior.”

With a flick of his finger, Cheng Qian made the tiny flame floating above his hand explode in midair, turning it into a lotus shape. It slowly floated like a river lantern up above their heads, lighting up the gloomy Ten-Party Array like it was immersed in moonlight. He put Shuang Ren back into its sheath without another glance, lightly knocked its cold iron scabbard against the ground, then sat down supported on it, making a beckoning gesture to the biggest devil in the world. “Come here.”

The other stood unmoving.

“Are you the heart demon, or Han Yuan?” Cheng Qian asked. “Tell Han Yuan to get out here and talk with me.”

‘Han Yuan’ smiled coldly. “*Han Yuaaaaan...* there will come a day that I completely get rid of that trash.”

In spite of saying that, he slightly shut his eyes. Following a short moment, the threatening qi that had infused his eyes with red light was cleared away, and though his gaze was slightly evasive, they were limpid within.

The real Han Yuan silently walked over to his side, then sat down. “Little senior,” he said quietly.

When a young sprout, he hadn’t been much to look at, only being an urchin with bad ideas and dumb laughter. After he had grown up, he still couldn’t be stated to have marks of particular handsomeness.

He was tall in stature, but his cheeks were thin. He wore long, pitch-black panlong robes, he was always tense, he frequently played two roles as the same person; that all resulted in him being covered in an oscillating, nefarious qi, which gave off a weird air.

Cheng Qian looked at the spiraling fog of the oppressive Ten-Party Array above their heads. A short moment later, he drew back his gaze and put it on Han Yuan. “Now that the mess has gotten to this extent, what are you wanting to do?”

Han Yuan didn’t answer, just looking at him deeply.

“Why did you want to jump into the sea in the first place? Why did you run off to mix up with the Nightmare Travelers? Why have you indulged in your heart demon? Hm?”

The other looked down.

“Tang Zhen said that were it not for our Master sealing up our martial grandfather between life and death, you might have gotten the title of Beiming from him one day... since you have so much prestige, why did you go to Fuyao to listen to the mountain’s sounds?”

Han Yuan suddenly grit his teeth hard.

Cheng Qian lightly bumped him with his calf. “What did you hear?”

This time, Han Yuan finally spoke, his voice hoarse. “I heard the thatch on the Hall of Ignorance’s roof flapping, Master’s three-legged sect-rule desk randomly banging on the ground, and a big bird raising its wings up and flapping its feathers. I guess... that might have been Shui Keng.”

“Hall of Ignorance... Master gave each of us a precept. Yours was ‘Solid Rock’, mine was ‘Free and Easy’. He also said that our sect-entry assignment was to copy the sect rules, but you shamelessly said that you were illiterate and refused to write out of laziness.”

Han Yuan looked to be between laughter and tears.

“When you said you wanted to draw out our junior sister’s yao skeleton, were you being sincere?”

The other slowly raised his head.

“Given that you say no, I’ll believe you,” Cheng Qian said, gently.

Back when they had played together in their youths, Han Yuan had been the one chattering on non-stop, while Cheng Qian hadn’t cared to answer, occasionally bestowing him with perfunctory grunts. Now, however, it looked to be the inverse, changing into Cheng Qian being the one with the incessant interrogation, while Han Yuan cherished his own words like they were gold.

Hearing this, Han Yuan avoided answering, merely speaking slowly. “The hand of the Bureau that prides itself on holding the world aloft... is a big tree with deep roots. No facts have come to light for so many years, and what has is only the tip of the iceberg.”

Cheng Qian listened expressionlessly, seemingly not surprised.

“Oh. You know,” Han Yuan went on, seeing him as so. “As it appears, the reason why our martial grandfather became a demon, and the reason why Island Master Gu died unjustly... do you understand that, as well?”

“I didn’t ask you about—“

“Did you know that on that day at the Immortal Binding Platform, the Bureau’s people were hanging around?” the other interrupted. “Apart from unfortunate sects like yours with only a couple people wandering around, they’re inside sects of all sizes...”

As he had dodged the question yet again, a nameless fire lit up in Cheng Qian’s heart with a *bang*, going to the very center of his brows. “I didn’t ask

you about that!” he enunciated, suppressing his rage.

“Jiang Peng had been introduced to the Soul-Consuming Lamp while traveling abroad,” Han Yuan went on. “At the time, if he hadn’t suppressed the Lamp and fallen into the ghost path, he would be just like those ghosts, turned into a sacrificial victim. Do you know who had passed on the methodology of the ghost path to him, though?”

Cheng Qian hadn’t heard about this before, but he didn’t care in the least right now. His fists that were beside him automatically clenched, and his serene expression finally shattered, unmasking his hidden anger.

“Master said back then that he was the first resentful soul buried beneath the Lamp. Do you know who the second and third ones were?” Han Yuan asked. “Fifty li away from Fuyao Mountain, at Tai Yin, where we are right now... there was a town no one has ever heard of. Jiang Peng had gone mad and killed over fifty villagers... out of every ten houses, nine were emptied, but one family had put their swaddled infant into a basket, then lowered it into a well. After being hidden in it for a full three days, he was fished out by an old beggar that was passing by the side of the road in want of food and drink.”

The other was stunned, sensing that something was on the brink of being revealed.

Why, when intercepting Han Yuan, had the Bureau not set up the Demon Execution Array at his old home of Fuyao Mountain, but insisted upon doing it at the foot of Tai Yin Mountain, fifty li away?

Why, when there were so many beggar children in the world, had their Master taken kindly to Han Yuan alone?

“The child followed the old beggar, turning into a young beggar. Over ten years later, he was brought away by someone he ignorantly believed to be a

zhenren in a rundown temple, and from then on, he had a courtyard to live in, cranes to play with, clean clothes to wear, and senior brothers that let him mooch food and drink every day. Even gods wouldn't have been that happy..." Han Yuan slowly turned to Cheng Qian, gaze falling to his chest. After a long time, he said in a raspy voice, "The path of soul-painting... has nothing."

At that point, his eyes suddenly changed. It looked like that painfully struggling, evasively lost Han Yuan had vanished yet again, while the tyrant devil occupied his body once more.

He coldly laughed, quiet. "They are the hand that holds the world aloft? Do we insects of that world have to let that hand crush us? Since the Great Dao has to be held up by such a vile hand, why can't I take a divergent path? Everyone hates me at this point, anyways! No one's going to forgive me!"

"No one's going to forgive you?" A string in Cheng Qian's heart snapped with a twang. Each of his repeated words were heavy as he looked straight into Han Yuan's eyes. "*Who's* not going to forgive you?"

Han Yuan... the *heart demon* gave a smile full of cynicism. "Don't our Sect Leader and the rest hate me? If it weren't for me, the Fuyao Sect wouldn't have turned into a public target of criticism, and how could our eldest, because of a century of... haha, *bitter pining*, have been infected with a heart demon, a weakness I took advantage of in Vermilion Bird Tower? And you? Don't you hate me? Murder is to be avenged. Beneath the thunderstorm in Nanjiang, you admitted as much yourself—"

"Our eldest racked his brains thinking up a way to clean up all that shit you did so that you could come back to the sect! You're saying he hates you?!" Cheng Qian roared, unable to take this anymore. "If *I* hated you, I would have never let you talk so much garbage! I would have long sacrificed my sword to kill you!"

His heart was mess of chaos. His never-ending anxieties about how this event was going to end, his bone-piercing disappointment at Han Yuan always shirking the answer of whether he wanted to take Shui Keng's skeleton, and the old feelings and recollections evoked from the memories of the Mountain-Hearing Array all blended together.

He suddenly tossed Shuang Ren to the side and smashed a fist into the side of Han Yuan's face. "How could you say that?!"

It wasn't clear whether the heart demon or Han Yuan was the one that had not been on guard against his unarmed beatdown, but he was hit head-on, a laughable bruise getting added to his face.

Cheng Qian picked him up by the collar, then ruthlessly kneed him in the stomach. "How many times did I say that I would tell on you to Master, and how many times did I *actually* do that? Han Yuan, did you lose your conscience after you became a demon?!"

There were vague tears in the corners of Han Yuan's eyes, but it wasn't clear if he was crying, or if they had been forced out of his sockets by the beating.

Cheng Qian pushed him against the wall, the slam making a thud. He snarled, yet to relieve his anger. "Who *doesn't* want revenge? Is this your *loyalty*, then? For the sake of revenge, you ignore everything and cause upheaval in the world, so that countless people will become the same exact 'insect' you had been, all because of you? You want to take your junior sister's bones for revenge? Then why did you give her a Soulseek Needle back then? Why didn't you take advantage of her being little to just strangle her to death?!"

The pain in his heart suddenly became indescribable. He panted harshly, then staggered back a step, looking like he was standing somewhat unsteadily because of his own rare, acutely vacillating emotions.

He clenched his knuckles that he himself had hit bruises onto, standing frozen for a long time. “Jackass!” he swore.

Han Yuan blocked his face with his hands. His spine appeared to get pulled out of him, as he was slowly collapsing. After hearing that curse, he slid down to the base of the wall, sitting on the ground.

Then, an uncontrolled whimper was heard, completely without prior warning.

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Chapter 90

Whatever was going on inside the Ten-Party Array was unseen by the outside. The dense flock of cultivators at the foot of Tai Yin watched the two rows of candles in front of the array with rapt attention.

They saw both rows have one go out here and one go out there, each extinguishing putting them on-edge. There were no more than a tiny cluster of candles getting stared at so blatantly, somehow giving off the desperate message of a blood-reeking storm.

Once the candles were blown by the wind and moved like grass, everyone would feel like enemies were everywhere.

Shui Keng vigorously rubbed her eyes, continuing to stare without moving as she whispered, "I never want to light another candle in my life."

Inside the array, Cheng Qian and Han Yuan were not speaking to each other.

The former stood quietly for a minute, the fury within him gradually subsiding. *If I was him*, he thought, *how would I be?*

Thinking it over, with how petulant he had been when young, he surely would have done even more extreme things, and become even more twisted. It was simply that he had comparatively better luck, for such things to not cover his own head.

How many people like their eldest were there in the world, after all?

As a child, he had thought Yan Zhengming to be someone that knew how to eat, but not to fight, and conducted himself with less than the utmost of dignity. Only after he had grown up and gained sense did he understand that the other was more capable of enduring injury than others.

It was no rarity for tough people to break their wrists with no change in expression, but there were not many that could maintain their true selves beneath deep hatred.

Cheng Qian knew that he wouldn't be able to do that, himself.

With that thought, he suddenly felt that he was in no position to admonish Han Yuan.

“Get up. Why are you crying? Do you think me calling you a jackass is an injustice to you?” He kicked Han Yuan with his toes. “There's an issue with the Ten-Party Array. I don't understand how the array works, and you need to do something a little useful, anyways.”

“Is there someone of Wu Changtian's among the Nine Sages?” Han Yuan asked, sullen.

“It's not only that.” Cheng Qian explained Zhe Shi's message, and their conjecture, with urgent simplicity.

The other's complexion changed, and he stood up with malice, smiling coldly. “Haha! I just knew that those teetering ‘nobles’ would get what was coming to them!”

With that, his expression flipped over, and he turned into the normal Han Yuan. “If you haven't guessed wrong, and there's another array outside of this one, it's definitely being monitored,” he said, worried. “If we disturb the Ten-Party Array hastily, we'll probably alert the enemy.”

It was clearly the same exact face, yet those few statements were as different as the sky and earth. It was practically impossible to tell that they were one person.

“...” Cheng Qian went silent for a second. “Can you *not* be one-man mob in my ears?”

Han Yuan’s expression was changing at flying speed, as if two people were incessantly fighting for the spot. In the end, Han Yuan might have been scared by Cheng Qian beating him up, because the heart demon won.

“Even so...” Heart-demon Han Yuan slowly said, “if you have an artifact that can restrain your life qi so that the array can’t detect you, it might take you for dead.”

Cheng Qian had no such item, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t do that. Right after Han Yuan was done talking, he saw Cheng Qian lower his head to crack open the ring on his thumb — in this further short amount of time, two more white candles had been extinguished.

He counted up the candles remaining, and then his figure shook slightly, his entire body seeming to turn into a chunk of rock. Had Han Yuan not known that he was there to begin with, he would have narrowly failed to sense that there was another person around.

He was shocked. “You...”

Cheng Qian paid him no mind, simply staring at the mirror on the ring. The next instant, he witnessed one of the flames on a white candle flicker, then go out.

Han Yuan reached out and touched the back of Cheng Qian’s hand, only feeling a slight warmth on him that was much lower than a human’s body temperature. The heart demon looked intrigued. “What a good technique! How did you get it?”

“Thanks to your *gracious gift*, the physical body my parents gave to me died,” Cheng Qian answered unhappily. “I had to refine a stone to rely on as

a new home. What now?”

Heart-demon Han Yuan’s eyes flashed, but the faintly malicious smile on his face was as steady as Mount Tai. Taking back his feeling hand, he answered unhurriedly. “Since the Array believes you to be dead, someone else will inevitably be sent over. Wu Changtian isn’t wanting to bet on who wins and who loses with me, he’s wanting to take my life here. As he’s planted one of his, how could he *not* have tampered with the array? If you wish to break it open, you’ll have to get what manipulates the array’s workings from his hands.”

“If you were well aware of all this, why did you humor him?”

Han Yuan shrugged. “I go along with what he wants, then smack him right in the face in front of the whole world. Hahaha... the Divination Bureau’s attempt at reaping benefits will end up with losses! Such a thought is really refreshing.”

This inner demon that Han Yuan had cultivated simply could not be predicted via common sense. He cared nothing for any costs that came with any benefits, and hadn’t considered the scenario of him *not* hitting his counterpart in the face, but instead falling into his trap. He just wanted to feel delight, and for the sake of one second of that, he would do anything.

Cheng Qian sighed, unable to talk logic with this guy. “How do you know the next one will be someone from the Bureau?”

“There was an unlucky sod at the start, and then there was you, so now a third will be transported to me,” Heart-demon Han Yuan replied without expression. “If that doesn’t happen, then Wu Changtian’s plant either got killed by someone else first, or they’re all dragging their feet... which won’t matter, of course. Were that to not be true, I’ll just kill them and wait for the next one. It’s no trouble.”

“...One of these days, I’ll kill you myself.”

Hearing so, Han Yuan was ecstatic, laughing aloud. “Dying by the ‘sword of terrible death’ would really be three lifetimes’ worth of fortune for me!”

Suddenly, his laughter cut off. Footsteps were heard to come from a side.

The array really had sent another person!

Cheng Qian gripped Shuang Ren tightly. He absolutely could not allow Han Yuan to kill right in front of him. However, when the person got a little closer, he suddenly sensed something slightly off — because they had the strong scent of blood on them, and anyone would know they were a demonic cultivator.

But how could they be?

Did the formation think that two people from the same camp would act against each other?

Cheng Qian and Han Yuan exchanged glances. The former swept the lamp above their heads back into his sleeve, then burrowed into the darkness inside a burst of shadow.

A demonic cultivator in white shortly floated over, resembling an elegant and delicate Young Master of the mortal world.

He was also one of the Nine Sages; on account of his manner of dress and bearing being inharmonious with other demonic cultivators, Cheng Qian had something of an impression of him.

The guy stood still once in. Upon seeing Han Yuan, he had not a bit of nervousness at all, seeming both unsurprised and unafraid. “Sir Dragon!” he said with a smile. “We really have been brought together by fate!”

The guy *looked* gentle and refined, but once he opened his mouth, he was like a really loud and broken gong, gabbering with an accent that came from some unknown chunk of cornfield. It didn't feel like he was shouting at any sort of 'Sir Dragon', but at his family's stubborn water buffalo.

Han Yuan shot him a look. "Luo Zhengyi."

Cheng Qian: "..."

The demonic cultivator named 'Zhengyi', which meant *righteousness*, answered candidly, taking a huge step towards Han Yuan. "That I could meet one of my own in this array is basically telling me to take a break... oh, Sir Dragon, why do you look ashen? Did you just come across some kind of difficulty?"

Han Yuan slightly frowned, shutting his eyes and not making a sound.

If this Luo Zhengyi actually was the one that Wu Changtian had arranged to deal with Han Yuan, then wouldn't the logical plan be that there would be only two demonic cultivators left after all the death, the Ten-Party Array would be broken, and then Han Yuan would be besieged when he believed himself to have won? What was with him showing up and getting in the way, purposefully informing Han Yuan that there was something fishy with the array?

In a spark's time, Cheng Qian recalled what Han Yuan had said — if there was an array outside of the array, someone had to be monitoring this one!

So, for those behind the outer array... was this a plan to ruin Wu Changtian?

In the blink of an eye, Luo Zhengyi sped-walk over to Han Yuan's side, as if he could fish out two jars of wine at any time to have a drink with him. A strong light abruptly slashed Cheng Qian's eyes, making his eyelids jump,

and once he could see again, one of Han Yuan's hands held before him had turned into a dragon's claw without any warning, its huge scales flashing with terrifying light. With extremely lethal demonic qi, he instantly tore off half of Luo Zhengyi's body.

The white-clothed scholar was half-human, half-turned-into-a-skeleton, a mass of mangled flesh hanging unevenly off of him. Even so, could still retaliate without a care.

He drew a tiny bell out of nowhere, and a burst of quick chimes rang out. The landscape of the Ten-Party Array suddenly morphed, and a swamp that stank of blood came into being beneath Han Yuan.

That bell could manipulate the Array!

While Luo Zhengyi shook the bell, he used his other hand to hold up his half-peeled-off countenance. "Tch. My magnificent bones are exposed."

With that, flesh grew out of the areas of bone on his face, clashing with the other parts of it.

He was one of the ones that had laid down the array!

"A Skin Painter," Han Yuan supplied.

"Alas, Sir Wu entrusted me with this task." It was unknown whether Luo Zhengyi or the Skin Painter was talking. "It's just a shame that we both appear to have been pitted. I really do feel wronged... but there's no use in explaining all that to you, since you'll want me dead whether you believe me or not. Let's get going, then!"

The instant he said that, Han Yuan was dragged down by the swamp under his feet. He coldly huffed, then transformed into a huge dragon, letting out a long hiss. The entire Ten-Party Array seemed to shake a couple of times.

Yet, how did this array work?

In the ways of the world outside, water trickled down to lower areas, intense fire melted gold, people were born, aged, got sick, and died, and so on. Those between the Heavens and the Earth, no matter how powerful they were, could not disregard those important rules. The array's method was actually to reset those rules to be within a certain range, and the people that entered it would have to suffer the manipulations of the array's master, unless they broke out of it.

Regardless of how despotic the demonic dragon was, the swamp was on him like a shadow.

Luo Zhengyi looked up and opened his mouth wide, degenerating his face once more into being half-bones, his jaw nearly going off somewhere else on its own. He watched Han Yuan's hard-pressed state in ecstasy.

Right then, the fine sound of metal and stone suddenly came from behind him.

His head, which was nearly about to split into two, twisted towards it. "Who's—"

Before he had time to say 'there', he saw not even the shadow of a ghost, yet felt frost attacking his face.

Was the Ten-Party Array haunted?

The next moment, his turned head was sliced off by a 'haunted' sword. A burst of black qi suddenly emitted off of his leaking neck — that was his primordial spirit.

Cheng Qian acted quickly upon spotting the opportunity, tugging the bell out of the corpse's hand. Without inquiring after how to use it, he forcefully

shook it on his own.

The Ten-Party Array promptly shifted according to his thoughts. A wide, astral wind was made, pinning the primordial spirit to the ground without room for argument. At the same time, Han Yuan suffered collateral damage, as despite his quick dodging, he nearly had a layer of his scales scraped off.

One messed-up human figure remained on the ground, a trail of blood slowly oozing out of it. In no more than a short moment, the demonic cultivator had been eradicated in both body and soul.

Han Yuan shifted to human form, licking the severe scratches on his arm. “What a ‘righteous noble’ you are, little senior, to sneak attack him from behind and kill him with no hesitation.”

Cheng Qian ignored him, raising the bell and making a gesture. “I’m going to go look for our senior. How do I use this?” he asked, indifferent.

“Submerge your spiritual consciousness into the bell, and you’ll be able to see the entire Ten-Party Array... in a place where no one’s limbs can touch you, you can hold the bell and be the master of the array, acting as you please.”

Han Yuan had fostered this heart demon’s mouth to be a bit shoddy. Coldly watching Cheng Qian fiddle with the bell like an amateur, he started speaking provocatively. “You can be no less than relaxed about him for a second... do you want to know what his heart demon in the Vermilion Bird Tower was?”

Cheng Qian’s expression was unchanged. “I already do.”

The other’s brows jumped up, the minute malice on his face changing to obvious surprise, and he silently sized him up for a minute. “You know what your own [eight characters of fate](#) are, then?”

Cheng Qian didn't answer, looking completely uninterested.

“You and Tong Ru are the same, with fates of ascending to the Heavens, cold and passionless. People like you two are most suited for cultivation; unyielding by nature, closed off in emotions, less open than others, finding the most ease in dismissing distracting thoughts. If you follow your destiny, you could accomplish great things...”

“What great thing did Tong Ru accomplish?” Cheng Qian objected.
“Rotting into a pile of bones in the Valley of No Sorrow?”

“Being ‘closed off’ is just being less susceptible to disturbances from external things during cultivation practice, not being without emotions. Who made him forget himself in indulgence, and be so persistent?” Han Yuan sneered. “In regards to your so-called Great Dao — what are sects? What are masters, disciples? What are human emotions? Those wanting to achieve the Dao are still bound by those things! Him qi deviating was not an injustice; had he been able to break out of the Three Lives Mystic Site, he might have long ascended to the upper realm by now.”

The Ten-Party Array inside the bell was complex. Cheng Qian couldn't understand what he was looking at for a second, and with Han Yuan chattering on without rest beside him, his hands immediately itched to beat this garbage guy up.

“If you don't cultivate your own Great Dao well, won't you follow in his disastrous steps?”

“I'm content,” Cheng Qian answered, not lifting his head.

Han Yuan smiled sharply. “You still put on airs of cultivating to whatever immortality, then? Practicing down whatever path? As I see it, you're willing to fall from grace.”

“I don’t have anything for a heart demon to get a word in on.”

“Don’t you worry, then. If you can’t control it and lose your primordial yang, we’ll see if you get any ‘distracting thoughts’ in your head.”

“...”

These demonic cultivators were practically getting more repulsive by the day.

This was a rare time that Han Yuan had made him dumbstruck via talking, and he got even worse. “Male and female cultivators binding as companions and dual cultivating at least has the harmonious conjunction of yin and yang blending, and wouldn’t be considered and indulgence in lust. What would you and our eldest be considered, then?” All of a sudden, he narrowed his eyes. “Oh... maybe you’ve already gotten *distracting thoughts*, and want to have a taste of him?”

The instant the heart-demon version of Han Yuan said that, he suffered another beating, just as he had been hoping for. He didn’t retaliate, either, taking the hits as if he was delighted to do so. It made one suspect that the reason why he had just spoken so rudely was for the sake of getting beaten up.

When Cheng Qian had started hitting, he had been humiliated into anger; not only had Han Yuan’s mouth been unclean, but he had genuinely incited the memories he had of the Valley of the Heart Demon in just a few words. Immediately after he forcibly tamped down his indecent reveries, his spiritual consciousness flipped upside down inside the bell, he picked up the bruised-up Han Yuan, then roughly tore open the surrounding barrier using his bell hand at the same time. They arrived at where Yan Zhengming was in an instant.

Right when they touched down, they happened to witness him blankly sticking a demonic cultivator through to the ground. His sword qi directly entered their inner sanctum, leaving their primordial spirit with nowhere to run to. Patterns of splashing blood overflowed, landing on his chest and cheeks. Detecting abnormal movement inside the array's workings, he abruptly turned his head, his threatening murderousness not yet drawn back.

Cheng Qian was startled, sensing his own heart's violent drumming.

As soon as he saw Cheng Qian, Yan Zhengming blinked rapidly, the sword qi that pervaded his eyes dispersing at once. He looked at the black-and-blue Han Yuan in bewilderment. "What happened?"

Cheng Qian's mouth was dry in the midst of his slight distraction. Tossing aside Han Yuan, who had started playing dead once he saw his most senior brother, he gave a simple explanation of events.

After listening to that all without a word, Yan Zhengming took off his thumbing, then split it open to see the mirror inside. From the moment they had entered the Ten-Party Array, likely not even a shichen had passed before the two rows of candles were almost entirely extinguished.

Cheng Qian gave him a furtive glance. On one hand, he felt antsy, but on the other, he felt that his antsiness was wholly disrespectful, and now he just felt awkward. Not knowing how to keep his own evil thoughts under control, he had to intensify his hatred towards Han Yuan.

All of sudden, Yan Zhengming appeared to have discovered something, quickly turning his back to them.

Cheng Qian came back to himself. Believing there to be some kind of problem, he cleared his throat. "What is it?"

The other took out a snow-white handkerchief from his lapels, then wiped the thin lines of blood off of his face using the ring-mirror.

“...”

Outside the Ten-Party Array, one day and one night had passed, which had ended with one black and one white candle remaining.

When the second-to-last white candle went out, Shui Keng grabbed Li Yun’s arm, her pointy nails digging into his skin.

He, too, was trembling badly on the inside, but in front of his junior sister, he didn’t dare to show as much, merely feigning assuredness as he spoke. “It’s nothing, Shui Keng. Think about it. They must have gone one-on-one as soon as they entered, which wouldn’t take long. The fastest cultivator and demon to finish most likely ran into each other. I’m guessing that Xiao Qian and our eldest will be meeting our Fourth Brother soon... maybe they already have something to manipulate the array’s workings.”

Just when he said that, there was a sudden disturbance heard from the crowd. A group of cultivators were seen to stand and look in one direction at the same time.

A team of flying horses came down from the sky. A circle of cultivators in Celestial Divination Bureau uniforms were escorting the carriage, and each of its horses donned head ornaments of pure gold. The brocade on the carriage’s body had been embroidered in a way that resembled nine dragons about to burst out of the cloth and soar up to the skies, and the thing was more than just for decor. From so far away, Li Yun could actually sense the exact same kind of aura as what came off of the True Dragon Flag.

Shui Keng looked towards the commotion. “Who’s that? Looks like they’ve got money.”

Li Yun pushed her head down with a hand. “Stay in the Stone Seed,” he whispered. A little bit after, he added on, “It’s probably the one casting the net in the Bureau that’s come. Though, nine dragons... are they from the ol’ Emperor’s family?”

During his speech, the fleet used stairs of clouds, coming up close in a wink.

You Liang creased his brow, then came forward while the crowd was whispering amongst itself, speaking to the one in the lead. “Sect-Uncle Xuan Huang, Senior Brother Wu and I had come to Tai Yin to lay down an array and obstruct the demonic dragon, Han Yuan, on the Sect Leader’s orders. You...” He paused, glancing at the nine-dragon carriage. “You’ve arrived with the Third Prince. Does the Sect Leader have any instructions?”

The middle-aged cultivator named Xuan Huang gave him a condescending look from up on his flying horse. “Your senior told me before that sword cultivation needs a wholehearted devotion to quiet practice, and that there’s too many trivialities in the sect that might delay your progress... I can see that he was right. You Liang, you will hand your seal over today. I know of a few powerful sword cultivators that travel abroad, so I may as well take you out to increase your knowledge someday. You might get a chance to gain a Master from it.”

You Liang’s expression changed.

“Make way!” Xuan Huang said. “This blood oath doesn’t matter! You all made it with a bunch of devils; are you not afraid of word of this spreading around and inviting mockery? Come, seize them all!”

While he spoke, innumerable black dots congregated in the sky, and a large flock of giant hawks flew over in an instant.

“Ah!” Shui Keng exclaimed. “Yao... no. They’re not yao cultivators.”

“What?” Li Yun asked.

She frowned. “Those hawks are just ordinary birds, not people of my yao race. Humans have likely given them pills to expedite them in yao cultivation. Since they never experienced practice before and didn’t develop intellect, a bit of training turned them into obedient beasts.”

The huge hawks, akin to a divine army that had descended from the Heavens, circled above the crowd of cultivators. One was the size of a small horse. Their leader opened its mouth and spat out a fireball, which was of similar wonder to Shui Keng’s True Fire of Samadhi.

The fireball turned into a firesea once it hit the ground, catching several demonic cultivators off guard and burning them into a sorry state. One amongst them hadn’t the time to scurry away, and as soon as the fire hit them, all of the demonic qi in their body started boiling — in no more than an instant, they were turned into a pot of stewed meat.

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Chapter 91

Yet, at the end of it all, it was naught more than an ordinary bird. How could it withstand the True Fire of Samadhi?

Shui Keng's back suddenly straightened. "That's not right. What it spat out wasn't fire — it was a yao core!"

The huge hawk's mouthful of furious flame had been earth-shaking, but its own conclusion was not the slightest bit impressive. It raised its head and let out a miserable shriek. The flesh all over its body was sucked dry in a snap, rapidly shriveling up, and due to the frame of its large skeleton that stubbornly refused to shrink, its skin cracked apart while it still lived.

Upon another look, the bird's bones that were exposed to the outside had already turned to stone, cleanly splitting away from its skin. They were dark and dull in color and lustre, giving off the morbid qi of death, and densely engraved with charms on their surfaces — it wasn't completely dead yet, but had already gone stiff.

Its two long wings could not be retracted. It crashed heavily upon the ground, dead with its eyes open.

These hawks were akin to climbing cacti, blooming brilliantly only one such a time in their lives. They had poured all of their vitality into smelting an inner core, then had forged ahead in the name of justice, rushing to send themselves into death in quick succession.

Even though they were only animals of no higher thoughts, did they not know how to cling to life?

There were always some points in time where the world made one feel that authority was absolute.

The corner of Shui Keng's eye fiercely twitched. Those feathers fluttering down painfully stung her eyes.

The second she moved, however, Li Yun shouted at her. "What are you being impulsive for?! Sit down!"

All of a sudden, she felt an immense wave of isolation. She thought for a moment; why couldn't she call upon rain to clear all these villains away? She thought for a different moment; if she actually *was* that powerful, everyone would fear her, and it seemed like nothing good would come of that. She would either be like her fourth senior, turning into a villain herself, or she would be like that Island Master Gu that she already had no more memory of, inciting everyone else to want to harm her.

She had traveled through the human world for over a hundred years, and for the first time in her life, her heart became listless.

The corner of Xuan Huang's mouth ticked up. "Very good. Open the array."

Before he even finished speaking, a loud noise was heard, and the landscape changed in color.

The entirety of Tai Yin's sky appeared to get covered in black banners, like dense clouds slowly spreading outwards. Several large mountains rumbled as they rose up nearby, their summits packed full with people raising black flags. Simultaneously, they stamped their feet and yelled loudly, resembling an army that had descended from the sky, making people too afraid to look directly at them for a second.

The hawks hovered close together beneath the billowing banners, and, after a time, slowly parted into what appeared to be two sides, while the flags over everyone's heads withdrew. A massive mirror encased them instead; its likenesses were indistinct in the sky, as if it was reflecting all the land

within it. Even the fuzzy images of humans were projected onto it like mirages.

A beam of light suddenly shot out of the mirror's surface, directly enveloping the whole Ten-Party Array in it.

“I heard the demonic dragon went in there?” Xuan Huang asked indifferently. “The Ten-Party Array has been sealed, so he may not come out anymore... come, set up the Skeletonizing Array. In no more than forty-nine days, regardless of whether he's a demonic dragon or demonic fenghuang, he'll be made into a pill.”

You Liang looked aghast. “Uncle Xuan Huang, my Senior Brother Wu is still inside. By our sect's rules, you cannot kill those of the same sect without the Sect Leader's orders. You—“

Xuan Huang gave him an aloof smile. “Ah, nephew... you're not a bit incorrect. Since it's known, come over now and pay respects to your new Sect Leader, all of you — Wu Changtian is incompetent in his work and has leaked the divine secrets of our celestial divination, so he should be punished for his crimes!”

You Liang staggered a step backwards, looking incredulously at his group of former sectmates.

No longer putting this minor sword cultivator into his sights, Xuan Huang cupped his hands arrogantly. “Do not fear, everyone. We have come today to eliminate demons and defend the Dao, which has nothing to do with our fellow Daoists. However, for the sake of preventing accidental injury, we also ask that all unrelated persons remain seated where they are and don't move. Otherwise...”

He laughed quietly, straightened out his sleeves, and directed his avaricious eyes towards the Ten-Party Array. “What are you all still lazing around

for?”

Several cultivators immediately stepped forth from behind him, each of them holding a token of command. After their tokens arrived on location, the thick fog outside of the Array was suddenly incited into roiling, the two remaining candles outside of it fiercely swaying.

Li Yun, who had just stopped Shui Keng from being impulsive, was now unable to sit still.

However, he still had time for action to be bought. An extremely powerful wave of spiritual consciousness brazenly covered the entire Array, then forcibly disconnected the tokens from its workings.

Xuan Huang’s expression changed. “The Celestial Divination Bureau is on a case! Who dares bar our way?!”

A plate of the eight trigrams, stained with blood, flew up, expanded in midair to be a hundred times bigger, then revolved rapidly. All the token-holding cultivators were flung away.

The plate was directly blocking the front of the Array, practically publicizing a challenge towards the Bureau. For a moment, all who had elected to sit were alarmed, and everyone’s gazes concentrated onto one area; the ailing-ghost-esque Tang Zhen quietly coughed twice, stood up, then clasped his hands with a bow towards Xuan Huang. “Fellow Daoist, the blood oath has been made, witnessed by the Heavens and the Earth. If you force it to break like this, they will suffer tenfold backlash. You may truly be worthy of commendation for eliminating demons and defending the Dao, but what about the lives of your innocent siblings?”

Right then, everyone realized that the Bureau had been neatly divided into two factions. One faction was the people Xuan Huang had brought, while the other came to agree to stand behind Tang Zhen — they were the ones

that had made the blood oath with the demonic cultivators. Rivers clearly separated the two waves of people, and they watched each other in preparation to fight amongst themselves at any time.

“What do you think you are?” Xuan Huang asked angrily.

Tang Zhen’s expression was unchanged. “Excuse my shamefulness. I am an insignificant, nameless pawn that isn’t worth mentioning.”

The other sneered. “I see that you have a dark shadow lingering about you, which rather seems to be the grace of a ghost cultivator. You’re definitely not anyone good! Take them all down!”

With that order, the crow-like Bureau cultivators grouped up, and the huge hawks screamed as they came down from the sky at the same time.

Since Tang Zhen had taken the lead, the cultivators that Xuan Huang’s people had pressured at the onset reacted at once. Someone unknown took it upon themselves to shout, “Pah! You lot held the order of ‘demon elimination’, then baited us into coming together here with intimidation and promises in the name of defending the Dao — that was clearly just an excuse to get rid of us in one swoop!”

The crowd became restless. Regardless of whether they were on the righteous or demonic path, none of them were idiots; these newcomers had arrived here so aggressively, they obviously had ill intent.

A stiff smile appeared on Xuan Huang’s face. “As you all refuse to take a drink of respect, you’ll have to have a drink of defeat...”

He looked up and let out a long whistle. The huge array that encased all of Tai Yin suddenly showed its might. Uncountable clay golems rose out of the ground — blades did not hurt them, and them falling in pieces to the ground would immediately spawn a new one, which would throw themselves at the

cultivators on-scene. At the same time, the hawks in the air came down like rain with no sense of self-preservation, and the cultivators that tried to get higher were rigidly forced to the ground.

The people of the Bureau, already divided in twain, warred desperately in this place, seizing their fates from each other.

Outside of the firmly-sealed Ten-Party Array, those two candles were akin to enclosed lanterns inside a violent storm; flickering rapidly, yet ultimately never going out.

Witnessing this scenario, Li Yun knew that nothing good was going to happen no matter how this went. He collected the Stone Seed, then whispered to Shui Keng, “Those are mortal birds, but they still have yao cores. With how much power you inherited from the Yao King, can you make them go turncoat?”

She spoke no nonsense, her true form of a Red Crane appearing, and then a divine, flaming bird soared up to the sky, resembling the lucky omen of setting sunlight. Her fenghuang ancestry immediately shone bright, with no room for doubt; even though her yao skeleton was not complete, she failed to exhibit even a smidgen of yao power, and was always getting chased and beaten by humans, she had an exceptional advantage when it came to undeveloped yao cultivators.

The crane cried out thrice. The large hawks, who had been disregarding their own safety, heard her, following which their formation gradually fell into disarray. They presently circled down to the ground, one by one, then slowly calmed down as they surrounded the crane’s side. The charms for hostile qi carved into their bones seemed to be temporarily dispelled by the good omen.

The cultivators that had been held back were promptly able to breathe, and the battlefield soon went from the ground to the skies.

Xuan Huang had been startled by the great yao's sky-filling presence. He hopped off of his flying horse and rushed over to Shui Keng himself.

The hawks had switched sides quite thoroughly, rising en masse to attack him.

Amidst this chaos, Li Yun jumped onto Shui Keng's back and stood there like a [pillar from the sea](#). "Go a bit higher. I've definitely seen this array technique before... just a bit higher, and I'll be able to calculate its eye."

She flew higher and higher. He got a panoramic view of these people that covered the mountains, madly calculating this array within an array.

He himself had never expected that there would come a day where the youth that had once been scared weak-kneed by a couple of tiny rat spirits in Yao Valley would be forced to be so collected.

On the ground, Nian Dada did all he could to tear his gaze away from the two candles. He didn't want to mull over which two people were left right now.

He wiped his face, raised his sword, and faced off against a Bureau cultivator that had rushed at him with three successive strikes, staggering in retreat over and over again. All sorts of weapons were getting tossed about all over the place, and he couldn't tell if they were the enemy's or his side's. With his cultivation base, he could only cover his head and scuttle away like a rat in this chaotic situation.

All of a sudden, he was shielded by a big palm fan. It deflected the several streaks of sword qi attempting to attack him, propped over his head like a protective umbrella. He turned his head to see his rotund father making a hand gesture in seriousness — several fans were flying and flipping up and down at his urging, defending all of the Mingming Valley cultivators with them.

“Dad!”

The ever-cheerful face of Nian Mingming was unexpectedly solemn, his potbelly protruding. He shot a glance at the exceptionally eye-catching Shui Keng up in the sky. “Son, since you’ve already paid respects to the Fuyao Sect, return to their side now.”

Nian Dada couldn’t wrap his head around his words. “What?”

“Go, now!” his father shouted.

He could not comprehend what his dad was getting at. Right as he had just taken a hesitant step, his entire self abruptly rose into the air the next moment, and he was fanned over ten zhang away by the man’s fan.

He rolled outwards while grunting, coming down with a face full of dirt and almost running into someone’s foot. He raised his head — it was You Liang, of the Celestial Divination Bureau!

Nian Dada jumped in fright, crawling to get a bit farther from him. Just when he wanted to howl for his father, the situation suddenly took a steep turn.

Xuan Huang was seen to roar in anger. Dozens of the hawks exploded and died at the same exact time before him. Shui Keng automatically drew back. At right that moment, a hand reached out of the nine-dragon carriage that had not moved all this time.

The hand was pale and unblemished, eye-stinging gold embroidered onto its rolled-up cuff, a palm-sized token of command within it.

“This has dragged on for too long,” the one inside said softly. “I fear that changes will be made to the Ten-Party Array, so let’s make this battle quick.”

Once he was done speaking, a bundle of light suddenly shot out of the token, possessing a highly penetrating force that appeared to pierce through hundreds of thousands of years of nights — and hundreds of people on-scene became violent without warning. Upon closer examination, they were all from various major sects...

Black Turtle Hall had six. White Tiger Estate had three... including Zhuang Nanxi, who had been actively gunning for Cheng Qian on the Immortal Binding Platform. Mulan Mountain probably had over eight. There were some more in major sects, some in minor sects, and even some amongst the demonic cultivators. These people had different ages, different cultivation bases, and attire that was further out of line with their actions, yet they obeyed the mysterious token at the exact same time, swinging their swords to decapitate their own sectmates.

No one had been on guard against these former sectmates. For a minute, each of the sects had blood turn into rivers flowing out of them, everyone shocked stupid.

They were the Celestial Divination Bureau. They were everywhere. They had a reputation as the hand that held the world aloft.

Nian Dada helplessly witnessed a rarely-seen elder of Mingming Valley stab a spear into Nian Mingming's abdomen.

Countless charms on the spear's shaft exploded. He didn't even get to see the final expression on his father's face.

Maintaining his crawling position, he was dumbstruck.

You Liang followed his line of sight over. "Are... are all of them insane?" he whispered in disbelief.

The group of giant hawks were slaughtered by Xuan Huang in the blink of an eye. Shui Keng lost her last barrier.

Xuan Huang's eyes glared over at her maliciously. He looked sinister, his entire body covered in blood — for a moment, it was unclear as to who was the actual demon.

Shui Keng's crane form was trembling minutely. Li Yun knew that she was afraid, and slowly drew his own decorative sword out of himself at last.

Still, he ultimately did not have a primordial spirit.

“Second senior,” Shui Keng's spiritual consciousness came through, “our eldest gave me the internal core of a Yao King...”

Faking calmness, he cut her off. “Don't joke around. A hundred-year-old Red Crane is no more than a chick that hasn't grown all its feathers in. Forget about digesting it; merely swallowing that three-thousand-year-old core will be enough to make you blow up and die... ah, you yaos. Even though you live for a long time, you grow up too slowly.”

“What do we do, then?” she asked, sounding like she was crying.

“I'll have a go.” He licked his rough and dried lips. “Xiao Qian and our eldest step in in every fight. It's finally my turn.”

“But you won't be able to beat him.”

He bust out laughing. “Why are you so chatty, sis? If I die, don't be afraid to get ugly. Turn into a sparrow, use the chaos to hide in the crowd, and they might not catch you.”

Saying so, he took a deep breath, then jumped off of her back. His scabbard flew him through the air, the sword he held shining as clean as if it had

never seen blood.

Xuan Huang had long noticed that he had no primordial spirit, so he didn't take him seriously at all. A shake of his sleeve metamorphosed a ji, which dashed towards him ablaze.

Li Yun bellowed, his sword like a rainbow — Peng Journeys Thousands of Li, a youth swimming.

He was not an expert at swordplay. The first thing brought to his mind during this danger was the very first form their Master had hand-taught him on Fuyao Mountain.

“Master, what is swordwill?”

“Ah, swordwill. To put it simply, when you practice this form, your heart will feel something — what did you feel?”

“I feel like I'm about to start flying. I want to go out and see what's outside... Master, when are you taking us down the mountain to play? Oh, right, I want to see what's behind the mountain, too... ouch.”

“Don't always be thinking to run off to the cave back there and cause trouble! How many times has this teacher told you? Stupid kid, why do you never listen...”

Before Li Yun's sword arrived, its swordwind had already met the ji's fire without surrender, pouncing on the flames like a gale slicing open burning sunset clouds. All of the unorganized true qi in his inner sanctum condensed a little, the sanctum of immortality opened, his qi sea began to change, and his primordial spirit came into its fledgling formation. It seemed like something had suddenly awakened in his heart, the world and everybody and everything in it slowing for a beat...

The sword collided with the ji at last.

It was no match for it, breaking into three chunks, yet its leftover swordwill was like a waft of unruly wind. It whizzed as it broke away from those blunt edges made of ordinary metal, free as it swept out, the fire unable to impede its progress.

Xuan Huang suffered a scare. Not having the time to dodge for a second, a half-cun-long wound was slashed across his face.

Meanwhile, Li Yun's entire person canted backwards from the ji's collision, falling straight down off of the now-powerless scabbard. The Red Crane caught him with a hurried cry, flapping her wings with all of her effort to fly far away.

There was a sharp pain in his chest, yet he felt elated for reasons he didn't understand. *Hah. So long as you're not afraid of pain or getting injured, fighting with your all is actually pretty fun*, he thought.

While he thought of this, he took out a handful of talismans from his lapels. With a casual look before him, he poured his true essence into them, then whipped them out towards the sky. Seeing this, the relentlessly-pursuing Xuan Huang instinctually used the ji to swat them, only for them to quickly turn into fine powder right in front of him, then explode into untold numbers of potbellied grasshoppers that were on fire. One after the other, they threw themselves at him with no fear of death, resulting in a grasshopper rain.

These objects were specially used for dealing with those of great power; the stronger one was, the more they would break the talismans into even smaller pieces, and thus make even more grasshoppers come out.

Such was Second Lord Li's signature.

The Ninth Chain is the Ninth Chain, Li Yun thought to himself.

Alas. Fighting was fun, but his chest really did hurt too much.

Xuan Huang was getting unbearably annoyed by all these little tricks that kept cropping up. With a sudden and loud bellow, his whole self grew ten times larger in midair, resembling an iron tower, and then he pressed his pillar-like ji down with the sound of a tsunami.

When Shui Keng and Li Yun were about to be crushed to death together below, Tang Zhen finally made a move.

Li Yun had never seen him do so before. The man in his memories appeared to be pretty much on par with himself; despite being well-informed and knowledgeable, he was basically all talk, and also in poor health, no weapons ever seen to be held by him.

Tang Zhen indeed had no weapons, using his palms of flesh to firmly hold up the mountain-like ji. Those hands were apparently made of gold and jade, and his face was unchanged as he remained within the fire.

“Fellow Daoist Li,” he said without turning his head, “have you already calculated the eye of the array?”

Li Yun, who had nearly been crushed to death, sighed in relief, nodding. “The gen trigram will be in position the day after tomorrow.”

“That’s pretty much the same as my own calculations. If I haven’t guessed incorrectly, it should be on the carriage. Go on.”

Li Yun hesitated. “Then, you...”

He didn’t get to finish, as Tang Zhen suddenly furrowed his brow. His hands that were holding up the ji made awful cracking sounds, then shortly

split apart like rock from their fingertips to their wrists. Following a tremendously loud sound, Tang Zhen's hands fell to pieces.

He quickly took three steps back, yet not a drop of blood flowed out of his emptied sleeves.

Xuan Huang grinned. "I was wondering what divine powers you had. Turns out you're nothing more than a refined corpse..."

Tang Zhen coughed lowly a couple times, looking like he was not long for this world. "Everyone has a day where they die. Don't worry, my fellow."

Saying that, a bunch of darkness surged in his sleeves, and a pair of white skeleton hands grew out of them. They looked really terrible coming out of such a refined man. "There's no need to be so concerned. I have some other tricks."

Li Yun had never trusted Tang Zhen, because the latter was not someone he could think too deeply about, as that would be too frightful. He had no one else to rely on other than him, though.

"Sect Uncle!" he heard someone shout.

He looked downwards to see a sword getting thrown upwards from the ground — it was Nian Dada, who was dripping snot and tears.

Li Yun seized it in hand. "Let's go!" he shouted decisively to Shui Keng.

Soon afterwards, someone caught up to him on his sword's trajectory — You Liang. "I will keep the law with you, Senior."

The two humans and one bird flew for the carriage like meteors.

The divine Red Crane, however, had a true realization after her actions that her cultivation base was not high, she was pretty much only intimidating in appearance, and You Liang, though nothing good, was a sword cultivator with a primordial spirit. Grief and hatred now mixing together, a path was cleared like a blade through bamboo.

Once she opened her mouth and spat out some actual True Fires of Samadhi, the cultivators weren't scared, but the flying horses panicked. The midair troops immediately scattered off into different directions.

There!

Li Yun was excited. A band of sword qi was already streaking over, which slashed open the curtain of the carriage traitorously embroidered with nine dragons. Right when he was going to raise said curtain with his sword, a hand that was so pale, it was nearly transparent reached out from within.

It grabbed the tip of his sword like it was picking a flower. At the same time, the man in the carriage lifted his head to smile at him. "How old are you?" he asked, slow in pace. "For there to be a junior that dares to tear my curtain means you have laudable enthusiasm."

In that second, Li Yun felt his hairs stand on end in a way that could not be described. He mixed in with Yan Zhengming and Cheng Qian's flow all day long; even though he knew that he couldn't fight anyone, he had never genuinely gotten so bone-deeply frightened before.

No... this guy was definitely not some royal dandy that had popped a heap of pills.

Eerie murderousness spread throughout the warm smile of the man in the dragon robes. You Liang sharply turned his head, pupils contracting. "Watch out—"

Li Yun's heart seemed to get grabbed.

At that exact moment, a loud sound suddenly came from under their feet.

The one in dragon robes gasped, forgetting to kill Li Yun in his surprise. He allowed him to fall straight down, where Shui Keng, nearly fanning her wings out vertically, scrambled to catch him.

Then, a current of demonic qi whistled up to the sky, followed by an icy swordwill that seemed like it was coming from beyond said sky. Swordlight was everywhere. The nine-dragon carriage broke apart immediately, and the man inside it whirled out to hover in midair, using no object to do so. His eyes swept around once as he gently rubbed his chin. "You were able to break out of the sealed Ten-Party Array... you gents have some skill."

Three humans and one demon were standing at the corners of a square formation, surrounding the dragon-robed man in the middle.

Yan Zhengming held his sword in one hand and his fan in the other. "Oi, who's this?" he asked Wu Changtian. "Tell me, how did the emperor appoint this old monster that claims himself to be some kind of Prince? Why is his face painted with a layer of white makeup? Won't those consorts of his be scared to death upon seeing him?"

Wu Changtian had difficulty understanding Empress Yan's worries and feelings over seeing someone that was pretty much just like him, his own face unsightly. "Apologies for the poor performance, Sect Leader Yan."

Chapter 92

After he was finished speaking, Wu Changtian stepped forth to bow.
“Greetings to you, Third Prince.”

Cheng Qian coolly observed, finding this strange. *What kind of Prince wears dragon robes?*

He saw that the features of this ‘Third Prince’ could be described as delicate and pretty, with red lips and pearly teeth. That complicated, oversized robe didn’t look off at all on him. His manner of speech plus bearing had a certain self-humbling courtesy. He looked elegant and smart, yet, at the exact same time, evidently placed no importance on anyone else.

“Oh, you’re exempt from courtesy.” The Third Prince aloofly made a motion to falsely help Wu Changtian up. Upon hearing Yan Zhengming’s rude words, he wasn’t a tiny bit angry, just one hundred percent self-restrained. “Sect Leader Yan?” he asked, with some presence. “Forgive me for being in seclusion too long. I’m not sure which sect your esteemed self is from.”

Yan Zhengming was accustomed to being arrogant. Now, he was meeting a man more arrogant — and even more arrogant-*looking*, to a high degree — than him. This was practically akin to a big-tailed peacock meeting another of its kind that had an even bigger tail. There was no need to mention how uncomfortable he was on the inside, and adding that onto the fact that he had been trapped in the Ten-Party Array for such a long time, he currently didn’t have a great expression, smiling fakely. “Hmph. I’m but a nameless pawn that doesn’t need to be brought up.”

The Prince’s gaze fell upon the Sect Leader Seal hanging from his neck, and then he let out an *ah*, as if he had received an epiphany. “So, you’re a descendant of Fuyao. No wonder... as I recall, isn’t this place not too far

from Fuyao's original location? Alas, many people have really been inconvenienced by this, you included."

Wu Changtian's expression went grave. "Long ago, you withstood the opinions of the masses to establish the Celestial Divination Bureau, and give us a status that made it easy for us to walk around the human world. Not a one of us is ungrateful, nor are we the type to forget grace and turn against justice. These years, we have been conscientious, never even slightly disobeying the agreement between us and the imperial family. Yet, your actions have been rather unkind, haven't they, Third Prince?"

Once that was said, neither Yan Zhengming, who had been ignorant since childhood, nor Han Yuan, who had been born a beggar, had any sort of reaction, but Cheng Qian was in the know. When little, he had eavesdropped at the doorway of the old village scholar as he had lectured about history. Upon bringing up the Bureau, the old scholar had only said that the Late Emperor of the time had been unhappy with the citizens thinking solely of immortal cultivation and doing nothing practical the day long. In a moment of rage, he had wanted to ban Daoism, but had ultimately been persuaded by his officials; thus, he had settled for the second best thing by establishing the Bureau, which was specially in charge of managing cultivators.

Cheng Qian had a great memory, and still recalled that the scholar had said that the Late Emperor had come from a military background. Looking at this 'Third Prince' before him, though, he felt that he didn't have the look of one from a martial family. "You're the Emperor of Wu?" he asked in surprise.

"I'm ashamed to admit it," the Third Prince smiled, "but that's my son."

"..."

That was some seniority!

When he had gone to Fuyao, the grandson of this old thing had been an Emperor of over seventy years of age. Cheng Qian was momentarily unable to add up how old the man was; it was only now that he understood the true meaning of the phrase ‘immortal mountains see no sun or moon’.

“Who are you to care about him?” Han Yuan impatiently asked. “Didn’t you just see, in the Ten-Party Array? This old bag has a huge appetite, and wants to stew us into pills. Heh... tell me this; there was a righteous-pather, a sword cultivator, a gritty stone person, and me, a big devil, that you were so casually trying to cook together in there. Were you not afraid of getting a stomachache?”

At the time, the Ten-Party Array had been completely suppressed and securely sealed by the outer Skeletonizing Array. Even though Cheng Qian had possessed the bell that could control the array, it had been to no effect. The three of them had been constantly watching the outside chaos via Zhe Shi’s ring, as well as simultaneously trying to find a way out of the sealed array like headless flies. Partway through, they had incidentally run into Wu Changtian, and only then had Cheng Qian learned that there was not just that bell within the array — it was unclear what artifact Wu Changtian had used, but he had actually caused the array to ignore him and put out his own candle.

Those circumstances had been unsuitable for internal strife, so the two sides had to form a temporary alliance. Cheng Qian once again released the True Dragon Flag; gathering the power of two dragons’ souls together alongside the demonic dragon’s, he then managed to prop open a tiny slit in the sealed array.

These few, appearing to have arrived like a heavenly army to save the show, were actually in a pretty difficult bind after breaking out.

Wu Changtian placed his hand on his hilt, voice cold. “Third Prince, don’t you feel yourself to have gone into qi deviation?”

The Prince turned to him, the corner of his mouth suddenly upticking. “Changtian, I heard that the Sect Leader has decided on you to be his successor... but is that true? I wonder, has he had the time to tell you about some important things?”

Wu Changtian’s eye slightly twitched. “If he didn’t tell me, how could he possibly tell you?”

The other licked the corner of his lips as he looked at him, his next words full of meaning. “Secrets I want to know are not ones I need to hear from his mouth... alas, your Sect Leader had profound achievements, so it’s a shame that his aptitude was mediocre, and ultimately lacking a layer. Only Tong Ru was once considered the world’s best, and so far, no one else has been able to surpass him in hundreds of years. I’ve long wanted him, but you lot forced him into the Valley of No Sorrow, and I haven’t ever been able to fetch that precious corpse. There was Gu Yanxue, too... but he preferred to be as broken jade and explode himself into pieces, meaning I’ve already missed twice. If I don’t make a move again, I really will age. Every one of you here now is merely passable, but it’s good that there’s so many of you. I’ll just have to take on this difficult task.”

They grasped the implication of those words at the same time. Wu Changtian’s entire body uncontrollably began to tremble.

By the gods, Yan Zhengming thought, there actually is someone in the world that can completely refine other people into pills and eat them?

He swept a look at the Third Prince’s red mouth and white teeth, thinking this to be utterly unbearable. *That’s really gross!*

“There’s nothing more nefarious than this, right?” Han Yuan asked from the side, straight-faced. “He’s so evil, he puts *me* to shame.”

The next moment, he suddenly changed face, then coldly critiqued what 'he' had just said. "Shut up, moron."

Wu Changtian abrupt bellowed, then hacked at the Prince's chest. The latter's figure was like a ghost's, floating freely through the air all over the place. "I swallowed all of your Master's cultivation. Do you think you're more powerful than he was?"

Wu Changtian's eyes were crimson red. "Go die—!"

The Prince gently flicked out his sleeve, so gentle, it was like he was only brushing away a flying flower that was in front of him. His form was quick as a startled goose, and he breezily grasped the tip of Wu Changtian's sword of whirlwind-like power.

"If you want someone to blame, blame all of your predecessors," the Prince whispered. "They were deceived by Hear the Universe, and signed some stupid Ten-Party Pledge..."

Wu Changtian's sleeves swelled, and a clapping sound came from his palms. Ebbing wind blew his hems out as he stirred up a vortex of swordwind, then pelted it towards the Prince's little white face.

Inside of that short sentence, the man had mentioned the two pieces of 'Hear the Universe' and 'Ten-Party Pledge'. Cheng Qian's heart skipped — he had long been wondering why the forebears of Fuyao had signed for their people to be constrained under the Demon Elimination Seal with the Bureau, and had also linked up a heavy vow with the Sect Leader Seal.

Were those things related to the Pledge?

The array method had been called the Ten-Party Array. The pledge had been called the Ten-Party Pledge. What was the connection between them?

Inside the Array, the demonic cultivator that had been shot with the ‘ear’ from his hand had said ‘Hear the Uni-’ right before his death. He hadn’t understood at the time, but now that he thought of it, could it be that he had been trying to say ‘Hear the Universe’?

They all quickly shot each other looks, but not a one among them, Li Yun included, appeared to understand the other two’s conversation.

Right then, a loud sound was heard. The two fleshy palms of the Prince, which had been motionless, were seen to rise and chop down — he tore open a hurricane out of thin air, and Wu Changtian’s entire body staggered, nearly pitching him off of his sword.

The Prince came up before him in the blink of an eye. “Changtian, I don’t think you’ve been taught properly.”

While he spoke, his white-jade-esque hands had already reached out for Wu Changtian’s chest, making a seizing motion through the air.

Seeing that he was about to rip Wu Changtian open while he still lived, You Liang shouted and flew forwards. At the same time, Yan Zhengming, who had been busy giving looks towards all his juniors, finally arrived.

The image of a sword — which appeared to want to split open the world, yet was also so dim, in had no light — came down from the sky. The Prince held it up bare-handed once again, the two coming up close together.

At this collision, Yan Zhengming immediately frowned.

The Prince’s hands shook slightly beneath the wooden sword, but the breezy grin on his face was unchanged. “Sword Spirit Realm... good. It’s not the finest, but it’ll do. If you train for another fifty years... ah.”

“...”

This white-faced old monster was taking him for red-braised pork that hadn't been cooked for long enough yet!

Practically incensed, Yan Zhengming's escaping sword qi abruptly slanted outwards. Cheng Qian and Han Yuan tacitly knew to come up and flank him from the left and right. Demonic qi, the most honest sword qi in the world, and murderous intent forged in an ice pond all billowed over at the same time, instantly submerging the Third Prince within them.

The latter's roar reached the sky, and he flung his long, wide sleeves, their shake-out appearing to give rise to a beautiful age of prosperity. Cheng Qian suddenly felt Shuang Ren jolt slightly, giving off the intent to backlash. A current of frigid frost was forced from its tip to its hilt, and his inner sanctum momentarily suffered a huge shock, nearly knocking a mouthful of blood out of him. Laboriously taking in a breath, he brought away his sword and drew back.

The others were not much better off than he was. It was unknown what kind of evil technique the Third Prince had, but he was able to totally swallow everyone's moves, then backlash them. A tiny strand of Yan Zhengming's hair had been pared off by his own sword qi, while Han Yuan's face was ashen, eyes beginning to go red as his blood and qi started to rush.

Right then, somebody mildly said, "Someone's actually practiced this method to its perfection."

Li Yun raised his head; it was Tang Zhen that was speaking. It wasn't clear what artifact he was using, but he was gripping a bunch of spider's silk in his bone-like hands, trapping Xuan Huang for the time being. The ailed scholar's face was dark. "There was once someone that said that when cultivators gather up true essence, they are absorbing the substance of the Heavens and the Earth. Only by refining it into self-use can one forge the body, train the spirit, have grand powers, and live longer than a hundred years. Because of this, there was someone else that once thought up the

wildest thing: if one could refine these cultivators, who were made from absorbing the world's essential qi, into pills and eat them, wouldn't they be able to absorb that person's skills and cultivation base?"

"What kind of person thought that?" Li Yun asked.

Tang Zhen smiled in mockery. "One that's insatiable, and full to the point of bursting, of course."

Before his voice landed, Xuan Huang broke free of the silk all of a sudden, his ji slicing down at Tang Zhen's crown. "How much nonsense are you going to say?!"

Li Yun's thoughts turned rapidly; this looked to be a technique similar in fundamentals to the yao race's passing down of yao cores. "Xiao Qian," he shouted, "the True Dragon Flag—"

The dragon's soul in the Flag could amplify the true essence a cultivator poured into it by the thousands. Since it could tear open even the Ten-Party Array, he didn't have faith that this skinsack could still refine it!

The Third Prince's face suddenly morphed. He jumped to throw himself at Li Yun.

Shui Keng flapped her wings noisily in a desperate attempt to fly far away. "You know that much, so what do we do if we attract his atten— Ah! How can he fly faster than a bird?! Eldest brother! Eldest brother, help!"

Yan Zhengming: "..."

The fenghuang-descendant was on fire all over, and possessed a luminous grace... given that she never spoke. The instant she spat out words, she was completely unpresentable, and an utter disgrace.

He did not hesitate at all to release hundreds of thousands of true essence-made swords, thus strictly confining the Prince inside them.

“Impudent!” the latter roared.

Yan Zhengming raised a brow. “Yeah, just a little.”

“Senior, don’t be a show-off!” Cheng Qian yelled. “Get out of the way!”

Right before he finished speaking, a dragon soul flew out of the Flag. It was coated in bits of white frost, looking like its body was draped in pieces of metal.

There was no way for the Third Prince to dodge this. He sucked in a deep breath, and then his long sleeves waved; his cuffs were like a black hole, and he actually swallowed up the dragon soul. His sleeves immediately froze through, cold sweat showing up on his face. Concurrently, there was sinking feeling in Cheng Qian’s hand, and the dragon bone cracked as it broke into two chunks.

Everyone was horrified — he had been able to devour the dragon’s soul!

Li Yun snatched the down on Shui Keng’s neck, fiercely tugging it. “Little sis, are you scared? Don’t run, shh— don’t be alarmed, any of you. Even if he’s swallowed the dragon soul, he’d need time to refine it! If you don’t take advantage of this to act, by the time he *does* finish refining it, none of you will be enough to stuff the space between his teeth with!”

The instant that was said, Cheng Qian was the first to react. He circled through one horizontally-slashing move, waves of expansive qi that resembled a clear, lightly-breezy night pushing past. The Prince was indeed impeded from swallowing that soul, and he dared not take himself to be a sharp edge; right as he went to withdraw, Yan Zhengming’s sword was already pressing down upon him.

In such an instant, Han Yuan's hand moved before his mind did, seemingly about to perform a move that would become Peng Journeys Thousands of Li. Before his True Essence could be sent out, however, his body abruptly changed ownership.

The heart demon sneered. "Joining in on the fun? You still remember a couple of moves from Fuyao Wooden Sword? Those three-legged-cat arts don't need to make a public disgrace of themselves."

Saying so, Han Yuan turned into a demonic dragon that went roaring in rage up to the sky, as if he was pouring out all the hundred years of melancholy in his chest until there was nothing left. The Skeletonizing Array jolted, seemingly also shocked by this dense hostility and resentment.

Torrential demonic qi ended up completely cutting off the Prince's means of escape, yet the man's form suddenly vanished. All anyone could hear was an earth-shattering shriek.

Everyone briefly ceased their war amongst themselves, staring at the same spot at the same time.

Only Tang Zhen was furrowing his brow.

Li Yun sighed in relief, at first, then detected something, bounding upwards with a hiss. "Look out!"

Right as he said that, in the span of a spark, the entire eye of the Skeletonizing Array shifted.

The Third Prince appeared to have transformed into a massive eddy, once again inhaling all the sword qi, frost qi, and demonic qi that shrouded him.

His entire being had already become a ball of skin. His flesh looked to have been pumped full of piss from a pig's bladder, making it bulge until it was

shiny. His facial features were now deformed, eyes bulging out, and there appeared to something worm-like crawling beneath his skin — it was terrifying to see.

Great masters could split mountains and part seas using the overbearing force of one blow, but could anyone truly devour a genuine dragon soul in one bite?

The Prince reached up his hands that had been blown up with qi, then calmly pressed his protruding eyeballs back in. “Why... was this a noted use?” he asked in a delicate voice. “It truly lets one’s hopes down...”

A horrible conjecture quickly arose in Li Yun’s heart. “That’s it!” he blurted. “He’s the array’s eye, *and* its machinations — he *is* the Skeletonizing Array!”

“Turning a physical body into an array...” Tang Zhen tightened the webs in his hands a little. “He’s worthy of someone that’s been an Emperor, with that courage.”

“Senior Tang, be less sarcastic! You’re knowledgeable! Think of a way to deal with this!”

Before Tang Zhen had the time to answer, this section of sky and ground was seen to begin to close the distance between them — the Third Prince was not staying his hand at all, intending to catch everyone in the array in one go.

The Prince turned to Yan Zhengming with a smile. “Nice swords.”

Yan Zhengming’s hairs stood on end. The array’s weather swiftly changed, and the primordial spirit he had just sent out quickly turned back towards him. The next instant, the wooden sword he held surprisingly moved on its

own; using his connection to it, Cheng Qian came before him in the blink of an eye.

“Xiao Qian!”

That matchless sword will swept up to Cheng Qian, then abruptly morphed into the exact same severe cold as he was. All at once, his entire body was frozen within it, resembling an insect encased in amber. Shuang Ren rolled downwards — Han Yuan was waiting to take it, only for a beam of light to leak from the Third Prince’s sleeve, then sweep up both him and the sword up inside it.

Yan Zhengming was entirely rooted to the spot for a moment.

Then, he noticed that Cheng Qian’s hair seemed to have white light flashing on it, after which he returned to his senses; the other was still wearing his puppet charm.

He spewed out the breath that had been stuck within him, chest right about numb.

The sky and the ground were getting closer and closer together. Everyone that had taken to the air with their swords was forced to land, only a few zhang of height remaining.

Wu Changtian promptly flung away You Liang’s arm that was supporting him, then created a string of hand gestures that were so complicated, they were too much for one to keep up with.

You Liang’s eyes widened, all the color on his face draining away.

Wu Changtian pointed one hand at the sky and one at the ground, then disappeared from where he had been standing. Shortly, a massive human figure appeared behind everyone — Wu Changtian pressed against the

continuously-merging land and sky with his hands and feet, and his body was forced to grow cun by cun, also lifting the falling sky up cun by cun.

For but a second, he looked like the deity Pangu from folklore, who had split the sky and earth apart.

He observed the Third Prince, who was distant inside the array's void. "Your Majesty, you've devoured a hundred generations of skilled people. If you devour the sky, the ground, the sun, and the moon, would you be able to become a god?"

The Prince was no longer in a human shape. The wide, embroidered belt of his robes didn't have an intact corpse left of itself, and his robes had been propped up by his body into becoming a globe that was packed full with the splendor of the human world. Even his voice was not entirely clear.

"If I devour the mighty, I'll become the mighty. If I devour the world, I'll become the world."

Wu Changtian deeply inhaled, then let out a sky-shaking bellow. His body sharply grew by more than a zhang, leaving huge footprints upon the ground, while the Skeletonizing Array issued a sound like it was leaking air.

The Prince screamed, one of his plump arms promptly exploding.

Then, restrained sword qi converged itself from all directions. Yan Zhengming's wooden sword slashed out Peak with a momentum that couldn't be stopped. It was like the entire Sword Spirit Realm had been overturned by this strike; inside the hidden realm of inheritance from the Valley of the Heart Demon, the swordwill from their devisor, which he hadn't been able to look directly at, had been just like this.

"That's true," Yan Zhengming called. "If you devour the sun and moon, you'll be able to ascend and become a [heavenly dog](#), old man!"

Could he swallow any more?

The Third Prince's face finally betrayed the color of fear.

At the same time, the ball of light Han Yuan had swallowed now had a crack split into it, after which the demonic qi belonging to demonic cultivators, characteristically brimming with the stink of blood, leaked outwards. The light was instantly wrapped inside a ball of black qi, and, following a soft sound, the demonic dragon burst through the wall, then landed as a transformed Han Yuan, who could be described as 'bedraggled'.

He shook out his panlong robes with no change in expression, smiling coldly. "The Three Lives Mystic Site, huh? Isn't that for dealing with those upright nobles that can't let things go? Isn't using it on me, the number one devil in the land, a waste?!"

With that said, he flung something out of his sleeve. "Catch!"

It was Shuang Ren.

The sword, filled with the demonic dragon's true essence, went flying straight for Cheng Qian, then hit the thick ice hard. A small crack immediately emerged on the ice's surface.

The next instant, sword qi belonging to Dried Trees Meet Spring seeped out from someplace undetectable. Like a vine, it accurately hooked its fingers around Shuang Ren.

As long as there was one trace, there had to be life.

Gentle swordwill pulled the vicious sword away. A crisp noise was heard; powerful true essence squeezed the whole way out of the crack, after which the whole ice block instantly transformed into a heap of fine powder.

Cheng Qian's lashes were covered in a layer of frost. The ribbon on the back of his head froze solid, split apart, and gently floated down.

As soon as Shuang Ren shouldered the snowflakes that blanketed the sky and were floating to the ground, they resembled an ice-cold cage, firmly trapping the Third Prince where he stood.

With a loud sound, Yan Zhengming's sword came.

Wu Changtian shouted in pain, simultaneously pushing against the sky inside the Skeletonizing Array.

The sky and earth split apart with a bang. The Third Prince's body made a small bunch of noises like it was bursting apart, quickly after which he shattered into a handful of useless ice.

The world inside the empty array cracked apart.

The Skeletonizing Array crumbled, as well.

Wu Changtian's immense figure staggered a step. He appeared to lower his head to look at You Liang.

His expression was both sorrowful and joyful. Soon, his entire body vanished into thin air, his physical form turning into mist and going away with the wind.

It blew over the day that seemed to have not been met for a long time.

Apparently, without any of them realizing it, one day and one night had already passed, and dawn was breaking yet again.

You Liang was stupefied, unable to make one sound.

After a calamity, life was more precious. Regardless of whether they were of the righteous path, demonic path, or Celestial Divination Bureau, everybody was stunned where they stood, coming to quit their fighting at the same time.

Han Yuan turned back to look at the Mystic Site that had long since disappeared. It was unknown as to what he was remembering, but that face that was forever switching between loss and pain or vicious cruelty now showed something of an almost-tranquil smile.

Cheng Qian's legs went soft. He used Shuang Ren to prop himself up against the ground, but he lost his grip, stumbling and falling.

His arms had since lost strength. Over a single day, Shuang Ren had nearly slipped from his hand twice. He struggled to grip it, blue veins on the back of his hand jumping out.

Then, somebody caught him.

They were saying something into his ear. A familiar hand opened his mouth and stuffed a pill into it; its bitter taste morphed into a wisp of pure qi, which went from the point of hundred connections at his crown to permeate all of his limbs and bones.

He snapped out of it, tensed body relaxing instantaneously. *Oh*, he thought, *it's Yan Zhengming*.

Thereafter, his hand that was desperately clinging to Shuang Ren loosened, thus allowing it to fall to the ground without any worries.

Chapter 93

When Cheng Qian awoke, he was already inside the Stone Seed.

The sun had not yet risen up into the sky. The Seed had become the same sort of tiny courtyard it had been back at Vermilion Bird Tower, with green shade covering up blood. It was like a momentary paradise.

A hand was placed upon his forehead.

Cheng Qian pulled the hand down, opened his eyes, and discovered that he was lying on the lap of his eldest senior.

Yan Zhengming's palm held several fine new wounds, and upon a closer look, it also had calluses left from wielding a sword for a long time. It appeared to be covered with past hardships, while only the smooth-looking back of this hand now remained so, still posing itself as being without care.

Yan Zhengming allowed him to hold it, but wasn't giving him a great expression. His brows raised, showing him the look of an impatient eldest child. "Since you're awake, get up, quick. You're making my legs numb."

Cheng Qian was limp and powerless from head to toe, supporting himself on his lap as he stared dead at him.

Yan Zhengming was made uncomfortable from his open gaze. "Did you nearly get frozen into a hopping corpse? That'll teach you to show off again next time..."

Cheng Qian wasn't sure which of his muscles was misfiring, but all of a sudden, without a bit of warning, he put the other's hand up to his mouth, then gently kissed the back of it.

Yan Zhengming was immediately unable to berate him anymore, sucking in a tiny, cold breath brimming with self-restraint, minutely trembling at the same exact time. Barely able to hold up his own unperturbed facade, he was tongue-tied for a moment, feeling himself to be a bit soft on the outside, burnt on the inside.

He grunted, then said in a low voice, “I can tell that you’re not seriously hurt, since you still have the mind to flirt with your Sect Leader.”

While Sect Leader Yan said this, he was expressionless, and so composed, he was a bit grave, as if he could immediately undertake the task of helping a departed soul find peace; yet, his voice was so tender, water could be wrung out of it, much restlessness showing through his deadly seriousness.

The implication of this was that he was absolutely eager to get flirted with again.

What a pity it was that Cheng Qian didn’t have a romantic bone in his body. His left hand carried his overflowing, sincere feelings, his right held up fancy yet trite and vapid words, and in the middle of them was an upright wooden stake that had become able to prop up both the Heavens and the Earth.

That stake did not continue this topic, instead turning over, hugging Yan Zhengming by the middle, and burying himself in his abdomen.

It was silent in the Stone Seed. The chaos outside turbulently flashed through Cheng Qian’s mind; stuff about the Ten-Party Pledge, Hear the Universe, the righteous path, the demonic path... a million inconveniences whistled past as they filed out of his heart. He was so unbearably exhausted by it, he swept it all away with a sleeve, thinking to himself, *Forget all that. I’m going to take a nap first.*

Yan Zhengming's familiar scent had the aroma of bitter medicine mixed in it. Nestled in his embrace, Cheng Qian's mind calmed to clearness, and he couldn't help but remember that preposterous, late-morning dreamland in Fuyao Estate.

He had gotten this old, yet the only married couples he had ever seen with his own eyes were peasant men and village women partnering up to spend their lives together — those mortals had done chores and quarreled all day long, never having any particular affections gleaned off of them. In those years, when he hadn't been cultivating, he had been in seclusion, or drifting along the world's paths, and before he'd even had the time to learn in spite of his ignorance, he'd gotten a pot of worldly love splashed right into his face, like a duck forced to roost up high.

He could only rely on himself, feeling about randomly like a headless fly.

Yan Zhengming was caught off guard by such a hug, both of his arms immediately suspending in midair at his sides. He froze, with no strength whatsoever, for a short moment. Realizing that Cheng Qian had zero intention to let him go, he thus asked, with amusement and helplessness, "What are you doing?"

Cheng Qian slightly tilted his face, eyes half-open in his haze; there appeared to be something of a foggy, exhausted smile in them as he looked at him. "Senior..."

"..."

Half of Yan Zhengming's soul had been hooked by that look, and he involuntarily held his breath and stared at him. After waiting for a good time, though, he could wait no longer for Cheng Qian to keep speaking; yet, when he looked at him again, he went silent all on his own.

He fell asleep?

Yan Zhengming then realized that he had gotten a little overly excited. Cautiously setting down his hands that had nowhere to rest, he placed one on Cheng Qian's waist, while the other gathered up the hair that had scattered over his knees. "Calling for me, then not saying anything," he mumbled to himself. "You're really getting more and more impudent."

As soon as he said that, Cheng Qian, who was *supposed* to have since fallen asleep, suddenly spoke up; very breezy, yet not ambiguous at all. "I don't know how to treat you well, but no matter what, I won't turn my back on you."

"..."

The second he heard that, Yan Zhengming was as dumbstruck as a wooden chicken. "What did you say?" he asked, as if he was sleepwalking.

Important words being said just once was enough. Cheng Qian refused to speak again, arms tightly hugging him as he slightly tilted his head down; this time, he really was going to sleep.

Yan Zhengming, however, grabbed his shoulders and refused to let up, chattering on. "Copper Coin, what did you just say? Say it again!"

Getting forcibly shouted awake by him on repeat, Cheng Qian grew annoyed, thinking, *You're so damn noisy. Can't you let a guy rest?*

Yet, when those words arrived at his lips, he could not break them out of them, shocked to discover that there had come a day where he couldn't bear to scold him.

He thus held up a finger to his mouth, eyes as closed as ever. The corners of his lips slightly upturned, revealing an unsound smile.

Yan Zhengming's eyes shortly went a bit hot around the rims, and a breath got caught up in his chest. After a little while, he felt a slight ache arise.

He had always suspected that Cheng Qian had only acted how he had in the Valley of the Heart Demon due to witnessing his demon, and done so for the expedient maneuver of not having him be trapped by it; actions that he might not have been heartfelt about, or truly comprehensive of.

Even if he *had* been heartfelt, were his cultivation to be delayed because of this in the future, would he not have regrets?

Upon hearing these words, he suddenly felt that, even if Xiao Qian truly did get annoyed with or tired of him one day, cherishing these moments would be enough to support him all the way through the endless life of a cultivator.

Beyond that, Cheng Qian always kept his promises. There was no one in the world that was clearer on that than he.

The Ten-Party Array at the foot of Tai Yin finally turned into a farce.

Tang Zhen's giant eight-trigram plate had been made from some kind of unknown deity, because it didn't shatter until the Ten-Party Array had been broken, harmoniously falling down from the sky and landing upon the sea of blood and mountain of corpses.

The blood oath was still in place, so, according to the agreement, the current situation dictated that the demonic cultivators' side had lost.

What a pity it was that no one really cared about winning or losing for right now.

The Third Prince had blown up and died, the Skeletonizing Array broken. The cultivators, having caught their breaths, had then flocked to bring down

Xuan Huang, who had been in a gridlock with Tang Zhen for quite a long time.

After this was done and over with, the crowd filled with enmity exchanged looks, having pretty much no idea where the conversation should start from here.

It had been the Celestial Divination Bureau that had used the ancient Demon Elimination Seal to force the various major sects over here in a war with the demonic cultivators. Despite said war having a strong start, yet weak end, many experts had died within the Ten-Party Array, the Skeletonizing Array had been buried partway through the Bureau's revolt, trap, and disturbance of the peace, and the Third Prince's move of hiding spies in every sect had killed more than the Ten-Party Array had, which was another debt of blood that had nowhere to be paid.

Conversely... the one that had broken the Skeletonizing Array with his body, thus freeing everyone from it, had been that very Bureau member.

Love triangles were distressing enough, to say nothing of this *hate* triangle.

The foot of Tai Yin had desolation filling the eye, with corpses upon corpses being collected and wounds upon wounds being healed. The Nine Sages were dead, and most of the demonic crowd had suffered injuries, essentially leaderless. Out of the fear of suffering losses, they all departed in succession.

According to the agreement, Han Yuan ought to be going with the Bureau to the capital, but its members had massacred each other until not many remained; Wu Changtian was dead, Xuan Huang was getting hung up for mass criticism by all the sects, and You Liang had carried Wu Changtian's clothes away dispiritedly. No one was around anymore, which left behind a bunch of small fry that were too afraid to provoke him, even with the blood oath's suppression.

In result, the number one devil of the land was crouched boredly at the doorway of the Stone Seed, not entering, nor going too far away.

Li Yun came out from the Seed, then observed him with complicated emotions for a time. His raised hand hung in the air for a good amount of time, after which it sadly fell back down — he had been in a bit of a daze, but the one before him was no longer that kid that had followed after him to look for bird nests.

Han Yuan turned back to look at him upon hearing the noise, not making a sound.

“What are you planning on doing?” Li Yun asked.

Han Yuan tranquilly pondered this. “Will what I say matter?” he asked, slightly mocking.

Li Yun had nothing to say to that.

“Is Cheng Qian still alive?” Han Yuan asked again.

“...He’s just lacking in strength. His aura will harmonize after a minute.”

“Is that so? Your Sect Leader Yan looked so worried just now, it was like his wife was about to give birth.”

“...”

Han Yuan looked up at the tiny courtyard the Stone Seed had transformed into, then caught sight of Shui Keng sitting on the wall far away, looking at him, yet not coming over.

It could be that she didn’t have anything to say to him, or that she feared him.

Who had made him say that he was going to draw out her skeleton, really?

Han Yuan appeared to mock himself, then appeared to laugh cynically. Knowing that he was probably a bit of an eyesore here, he turned and went for the remnants of the Ten-Party Array.

After wavering for a while, Li Yun suddenly called out to stop him.

The other looked like he had back when he had admitted at the mountain cave pool that he had intentionally tricked Han Yuan into going to the back of the mountain, seeming like he had to drum up a great amount of courage to speak. “You are aware that Fuyao Mountain not opening to this day is because Master added a three-path lock of the Heavens, the Earth, and humanity inside of the Sect Leader Seal?”

Han Yuan raised a brow slightly as he looked at him coldly, as if saying, ‘This is an internal matter of your sect. What does it have to do with me?’

Li Yun gazed back at him steadily. “To open the lock of humanity, we’ll need the true essence of five people — five, including you.”

Hearing this, Han Yuan was surprised at first, following which his face spasmed slightly, as if he had been slapped by the person he was closest to, heart senselessly welling up with dejected grievances that he had nowhere to relay.

“Xiao Yuan,” Li Yun lightened his voice to ask, “was that really the Three-Lives Mystic Site that fell out of the Third Prince’s sleeve? What did you see inside?”

The other sneered. “I saw all of you dead. Happy?”

With those estranged-sounding, cold words, Li Yun said nothing for a moment, but his face held sorrow.

Right then, Shui Keng, as she was up on the wall of the Stone Seed, suddenly started to speak. “The Mystic Site is considered to be part of the path of heaven. Our Fuyao sect has only ever walked the path of humanity since ancient times. With those that are irrelevant, who trusts who... who... uh, that’s... that’s what...”

The final piece was clearly rather vulgar, as she was too afraid to say it, stammering out a mess.

Whether it was the words in front or the rude words in back, that hadn’t sounded much like her typical manner of speaking. Han Yuan lightly smiled. “Tell Sect Leader Yan to mind his own business for me, won’t you?”

With that, he walked a few steps away, then suddenly stopped, swapping owners again in the blink of an eye.

This Han Yuan even turned to smile at Li Yun, immediately after which he drew a palm-sized scale out from a pocket. “Second senior, go on and hand this over to our eldest.”

Li Yun reached out to catch the dragon scale that came flying right at him; it appeared to be stained with ink, faintly glimmering beneath the sunlight, and he could sense the gently-flowing true essence within it with his hand placed on its surface.

After he was done talking, Han Yuan took large strides up onto the tall platform of the remnant Ten-Party Array, then sat down cross-legged like no one else was around, as if he was provoking the entire world on purpose: *I’m right here, but what can you even do to me?*

Li Yun held the black dragon scale in hand as he observed it for a minute, then waved at Shui Keng. “Give it to the Sect Leader.”

“Why don’t you do it?” she inquired.

Not to be reasoned with, Li Yun stuffed the scale into her hands, face blank.
“Go, now. Can my status as your senior still not make you move?”

She accepted the scale, understanding nothing, then flipped into the Stone Seed and barged right in.

Unexpectedly, the second she entered, she saw what she should not be seeing — Cheng Qian was currently laying on Yan Zhengming’s lap, no propriety. On him were dirt-stains where there weren’t blood-stains, and further areas that had been scorched, while their eldest, who would whine and holler for half the day whenever anyone else forgot to wash their hands one time, actually leaned over without reservation and kissed him on the brow.

One of her feet was stuck upon the threshold, neither entering, nor withdrawing. She held the scale up in a posture of pledging an oath, flabbergasted.

I’m going to grow sties... no, I’m going to be silenced! she thought.

Yan Zhengming looked like he had since received the greatest entrustment in the world. He looked up at Shui Keng with near-calm, his mannerisms unhurried as he hushed his voice to ask, “What is it?”

Meeting with his gaze, she shuddered harshly, then blurted out, “Wh... when I’m a ghost, I’m not going to let Li Yun off!”

“...”

After snapping out of it, she hurriedly set the black dragon scale down.
“Uh, nevermind. Fourth brother told me to bring this to you.”

He nodded. “Did you say what I told you to tell him?”

“...I did. He told me to pass back to you that you should mind your own business.”

He huffed, cursing something out. Upon looking up and catching sight of Shui Keng still staring dead at them, he coughed dryly. “What are you looking at? Do you have anything else?”

That utterance appeared to frighten her fragile heart. She jolted, and then, without further ado, frantically fled... stumbling on the doorsill right before she left.

Han Yuan sat on the remnant array site for three days, and the crowd had still not talked over a statute. The demonic dragon was akin to a hot potato; when not captured, everyone hated that they couldn't execute him at once, but when actually captured, nobody knew how they ought to deal with him.

He had gone from Nanjiang all the way up North, creating rivers of blood by the wayside and giving rise to a catastrophe. That could be described as heinous, a crime worthy of execution.

If he had died in the Ten-Party Array, that would have been the best ending. Yet, not only had he refused to die, he had lived with not a piece of him missing, nor a decrease in his cultivation.

This was quite troublesome.

The Fuyao Sect was now avoiding suspicion and refusing to speak out. The Bureau had caused this mess, so it didn't have the face to speak out. The remaining two superpowers of the Four Sages had never shown up, merely sending sect members whose words forever weighed very little, and had further been gravely injured by the Bureau's treachery, thus having no spare time to care.

Tang Zhen had been tending to wounds all this time. The other sects either didn't have enough weight, or refused to offend Fuyao over this. No one dared to stand up and say, 'We should kill this guy.'

The situation was in a deadlock.

When Fuyao's few came out of the Stone Seed, they saw that Han Yuan, who should have been a prisoner, was sitting upright on the array platform and looking down upon the land.

Yan Zhengming waved his hand to stow the Seed away. Each of the sects immediately cast their gazes over at the same time, which ended with Liu Lang coming up and asking deferentially, "Senior Tang sent me to inquire; what destination will you be heading to, Sect Leader Yan?"

"We have been traveling abroad for many years, so it's time we ought to return to the sect," the other answered. "I intend to return and open Fuyao Mountain. If Brother Tang does not disdain it, there is no harm in him coming over to stay for a while."

Those listening with their ears perked up promptly went to exchange whispers with those beside them. A few years back, the name 'Fuyao' had still been unknown; after the Immortal Binding Platform and the event at Tai Yin Mountain, there was likely nobody that *didn't* know about it.

Even all the Nanjiang devils had heard widespread rumors of rare treasures being on Fuyao Mountain, so it naturally made everyone curious.

Unfortunately, none of them had the guts to pry.

Right then, Liu Lang asked the second question that everyone was concerned over. "Congratulations to you, then. Senior Tang also requested that I ask: what is your stance on the demonic dragon?"

Yan Zhengming shot a glance at the not-far-away Tang Zhen. Refusing to be the first to betray his intent, he said, “This matter should have been decided by the Bureau, but since their people aren’t here, I should let the impartial party of Brother Tang speak on this, yes?”

Tang Zhen clasped his fist from afar. “I wouldn’t dare to. Everyone here has suffered so much loss from the Skeletonizing Array, I believe it would be better for this matter to be postponed, so that everyone can report back to their sects after tidying up. Can we agree to meet here on the fifteenth of next month to discuss this again?”

Saying as much, he turned to Han Yuan, voice mild. “I believe that with your character, Zhenren Han, you’d certainly dislike suffering backlash from the blood oath by fleeing.”

Han Yuan snorted coldly, not even lifting his eyelids.

Ahead was a prodigious comparison to the Third Prince, who had claimed to be of the righteous path of the human world. If Han Yuan actually did abide by his promise by confining himself inside the remnant array for one month, he would look considerably principled.

Furthermore, Tai Yin was at Fuyao’s foot, meaning that the major sects might actually let him slip the net out of regards for Fuyao’s face. Yan Zhengming felt like clarity was in his heart; knowing that Tang Zhen was appearing to be impartial, yet intending to let Han Yuan free in actuality, his heart settled.

Yan Zhengming glanced at Han Yuan, thinking, *His death wouldn’t even settle this. This dickbag deserves to suffer out in the wind and rain for a month.*

Thus, he said with decisiveness, “Let’s go.”

Below Tai Yin, the crowd of cultivators gradually scattered. Tang Zhen accepted the invitation to go with everyone to Fuyao Mountain.

The three locks were fully open. Standing at the base of the mountain, Yan Zhengming took in a deep, soundless breath. Where no one could see, Cheng Qian lightly placed his hand on his waist.

The stardust inside the Sect Leader Seal converted, the spiritual consciousnesses of generations past overlapping together to conform with that distant mountain.

In their early years of wandering the land, they had dared not mention this old place out of fear that others would covet it, but now, it could finally reappear into the world with honor; no one dared to invite themselves in, and no one dared to humiliate and despise them.

Over this past century, Yan Zhengming had been helpless in the presence of this mountain-sealing order — its three paths seeming to be forever locked — countless times, despaired countless times, and complained about their Master countless times. Only now did he understand the deep meaning therein.

Had he not undergone polishing, how would he have been able to bear such a heavy ancestral estate?

With an enormous *bang*, Fuyao Mountain opened.

A hundred years had passed in the human world. The scenery was the same as ever, with cranes perched on the tips of branches coming and going excitedly between the peaks.

On the mountain's waist was the shaded, bombastic calligraphy of its plaque, and at its base, the thatched Hall of Ignorance their Master had used, ever inharmonious with its surroundings, could vaguely be seen.

Time had stopped here for these hundred years. Not a thing appeared to have changed. The Daolings that they hadn't taken with them back in the day were still standing by on either side of the mountain gates, stretching, looking like they had only just awoken from a brief nap. They all looked at the few that had left home when young in shock, nearly too afraid to recognize them.

The mountain-sealing order dissipated with the wind, and that frozen time finally became as thawing water, gurgling as it flowed once again.

Far away, Han Yuan sat alone inside the Ten-Party Array. When he quietly lifted his head, he was already dripping with tears.

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Chapter 94

When Yan Zhengming had left Fuyao Mountain, he had been no more than seventeen. Once slightly over twenty, he had focused on honing the sword, and his features had grown without much change.

Now, his primordial spirit had stepped into the Sword Spirit Realm. Though his features had not been even a tiny bit dyed by the traces of the years, his bearing was leagues different.

The two gate-watching kids exchanged a look, some second thoughts in their hearts. Fuyao Mountain was a paradise of few visitors, and they had never seen such greatly powerful people before without their master present.

They shook with some fear. After a long while of hesitation, the slightly older one rallied the courage to stand in front of his companion by stepping forward. He was too afraid to raise his eyes, respectfully bowing out level. “Our Sect Leader went out for a trip yesterday, and his date of return is unknown. All of you immortals have come at an inopportune time. Dare I ask your names, so that I may report them later?”

The slightly younger child was about twelve, with a round face that hadn’t shed its baby fat. He stared straight at their group from a few steps away.

Yan Zhengming choked. He wanted to say, ‘You don’t even recognize me?’, but when the words came up to his lips, he suddenly realized that he couldn’t recall the names of these two kids, either.

It was like he had returned to his previous life, gazing out across a hundred-year River of Forgetfulness — he had memories of everything, but their images weren’t quite solid.

There was a saying amongst the people that went, ‘Youths that leave the home are aged when they return.’ This was probably that feeling, huh?

Suddenly, the younger Daolings blinked, then exclaimed in alarm. “Ah, Brother Teng Huang! This man looks like our Young Lord!”

Ah, right. The kid was called Teng Huang... Yan Zhengming quickly remembered that these Daolings had been servants of the Yan family, which had meticulously selected a bunch of them to send with him when he had left. Plus, to simplify things, he had bestowed them all with the names of pigments, like a palette. At the time, he had been so spoiled, he had obeyed no laws nor gods, nor had he committed a single one of the people coming and going from his side to memory, heartlessly and instantly forgetting the names he had come up with himself.

That title of ‘Young Lord’ had not been heard in a very long time. Once the group heard it, they all began to laugh.

“Fuyao has been sealed for over a hundred years, but it’s only been a day and a night for you all,” Li Yun said with a smile. “Looks like you don’t know how much time has passed; he isn’t your Young Lord now, but your Sect Leader. I’m Li Yun, remember?”

Teng Huang’s eyes went wide. He stood there for a while in disbelief. “A hundred years?”

His gaze swept out aimlessly, and he happened to catch sight of the large locust tree at the foot of the mountain, which had a thick trunk and luxuriant, many-leaved branches.

He stared at it in a daze for a while, then murmured, “The Sect Leader planted that before he left, and said that when it had grown a few times around, you would all be back...”

Now, it already looked to be covered in pavilions.

Teng Huang futilely counted on his fingers for a short moment. It was unknown what amount he had counted up, but he lifted his head after, then tried hard to see a bit of familiarity in everyone's faces. "You're S-Second Uncle... and Third Uncle! Didn't you just go up the mountain with the Sect Leader the year before? You were only yea big and tall... Gods..."

His gaze fell upon Shui Keng, and he hesitated, too afraid to name her.

"I'm Han Tan," she said.

Even though he had had a guess, seeing this one grow up overnight was still a bit hard to digest.

"The Young Lord is the Sect Leader? What about Sect Leader Han?" the younger child bluntly asked. "And why didn't you come back with him?"

As soon as that was said, everyone's expressions went glum. Upon seeing this situation, Teng Huang, who was the best at weighing words and observing expression, swiftly gave his friend a smack. "Since you can talk so much, go up the mountain and make a report, now! Don't let them be neglected! The Young Lord... pah, the Sect Leader and the rest have returned!"

Fuyao Mountain became quite lively. At this interim, all of its living things abandoned their posts to come see — who could have expected that after they had taken a mere doze, they would wake up to an entirely new sun and moon?

Even the crane circling the front of the Hall of Ignorance swooped down, alert; Shui Keng's appearance had undergone major change, but it still remembered her scent.

After nuzzling against her, it stretched its neck out to gaze down the mountain, as if believing that another would also come back.

Shui Keng had the most shallow recollection of the Mountain, silently lagging all the way to the back and unable to fully take in these familiar, yet unfamiliar sights. She looked and looked, then remembered something, lowering her head with some loneliness.

“What’s wrong, young miss?” someone beside her asked.

She looked up; it was their guest, Tang Zhen. She didn’t know him well, but in the Skeletonizing Array, he had saved her life from Xuan Huang, so she had a big of a cordiality towards him.

Pausing for a bit, she then forced out a smile. “I’m over a hundred years old, Senior. I’m not a young miss.”

“In your Red Crane clan, one’s bones aren’t yet fully grown in a hundred years’ time. How are you not a young miss?”

Upon hearing the name ‘Red Crane’, her forced smile gradually dimmed, and she sighed. “I’m not a real Red Crane.”

“Why do you say that?”

Despite that being a question, he didn’t look at all surprised. He seemed to never be surprised at anything, ever.

Shui Keng was not her second senior of very devious heart; she didn’t have much caution towards others, let alone someone that had such a deep relationship with the Fuyao Sect. Hence, she explained without any hesitation. “My mom was the Yao Empress of Yao Valley, but my dad wasn’t the Yao King. I was born of the her, and a human.”

Tang Zhen apparently hadn't expected her to be so frank, startling slightly.

"I heard that after I was born, I stayed inside my egg for over a hundred years, and everyone else believed that I was a dud. My mom placed me on the Immortal Overlook Platform, which she died from trespassing on. I've never see my father before, so I don't know if he's still alive, let alone his name. My surname is our Master's, and my name was randomly blurted out by our eldest... but that's not a name that gets used often. I don't hear it more than a few times a year because my seniors go 'Shui Keng, Shui Keng' all day long. It's like, as long as they're not wanting to scold me, they won't remember that name at all."

Despite her grumbling, there was broad lack of care within her words. Amused by her, the sickly look on Tang Zhen seemed to ebb a little.

She then scratched her nose, abandoning all hope. "In any case, my second brother says that I'm a mixed-breed chicken that my father doesn't want and mother doesn't love. Now that we're back at Fuyao, I might be meeting people from Yao Valley every New Year's. I'm not sure what the Yao King will think once he sees the [green hat](#) that I am."

Tang Zhen paused. Right as he opened his mouth in want to comfort her, she blinked, then attempted to find excuses for herself. "Oh, but that's nothing, really. I heard that the Yao King's heart is only as big as the tip of a needle. He's always wanted to kill me when I was egg, but now that the Sect Leader is here, he won't dare to do anything to me. If he tries to trip me up any after he sees me, I'll be able to avenge myself! Haha, if he rages himself to death, the next Yao King might be me!"

This 'mixed-breed chicken' was quite ambitious. Tang Zhen quietly swallowed what he was going to say back down, smiling. "Well said."

Shui Keng ran a few steps ahead, then forcefully patted the sad-looking Nian Dada. "Nephew, the dead can't be revived, but your dad was still a

cultivator with a primordial spirit! As long as his spirit didn't die, he'll be able to reincarnate. When you officially enter the sect later on, I'll bring you up the nine-story Library Tower. There has to be a way to look for a reincarnation in there!"

He looked at her with bloodshot eyes. "Thank you, Aunt."

He had been a noisemaker before, able to play two roles as one person, but now, he had apparently settled down after a great tragedy. He raised his head to view the Mountain; the magnificence of the human world flashed past in his eyes like a blur. Not caring about it, he merely thought to himself, *Was it because I'm too useless?*

Inadvertently turning his head, Cheng Qian happened to catch sight of the look in the eyes of his easily-earned disciple, and his heart suddenly moved.

Every young person's ambitions apparently began with this 'I'm too useless' look. The world spun like each and every generation was one complete revolving, and continued to do so.

Yan Zhengming suddenly hauled him over from the side. "Hey, why are you always looking at what he's doing?" he whispered, unhappy. "Why don't you look at me more?"

"..."

He was now regretting what he had said in the Stone Seed, because he knew that their eldest senior, who was a complete expert at seizing advantages, was going to walk all over him.

Fuyao Mountain was a place of pure cultivation, in the end, so flashy displays of joy were unsuitable. In the evening, Yan Zhengming merely called everyone over, as a simple, open-air banquet had been arranged before the lecture hall.

The cook had been specially sent here by the Yan family, back in the day. When the dishes were being served, he was a bit dazed — hadn't the Young Lord and his juniors been growing in body and snacking just a day ago?

In the blink of an eye, they were now abstaining from grains and alcohol!

During the feast, Cheng Qian packed something up, then left by himself.

Tai Yin was over fifty li from Fuyao, but it took no more a moment by sword.

The remnant bloody aura surrounding the Ten-Party Array lingered without dissipation. The people were all long gone. Some of the dead, no one had buried, the corpses lying alone, waiting to become one with the world.

Han Yuan's entire self appeared to have already become the darkness.

Upon hearing deliberately heavy footsteps, Han Yuan slanted his head, expression overcast. It was unclear whether this was his original self, or his heart demon that wasn't prone to talking much.

Cheng Qian held Shuang Ren in hand, silently walked over, then crouched next to him, pulling out an oilpaper parcel from a pocket.

There was a tiny oil stain on the bag's edge, and it was still warm. He threw it into Han Yuan's hands, brushed away the dust on the remnant array, and sat.

Han Yuan opened it, then saw that there was a bundle of translucent, sparkling pine nut candy inside, which was mixed in with the veiled aroma of osmanthus. Each one had been sliced into thumb sized chunks, and were separated, none sticking together.

The devil was dumbstruck for a moment. He didn't say anything rude, nor did he cry with gratitude, merely taking one and stuffing it into his mouth.

His cheeks were so thin, their bones could be seen, giving him the cutting look of a hard life, and they bulged from a single piece of candy being stuffed in them. His face was still stained with blood while he savored the stuff way too seriously, furrowing his brows and looking bitterly hate-filled, as if he was swallowing down medicine.

His mouth kept on going. In seconds, even the crumbs were gathered up together, then dumped into his mouth as he boldly threw his head back.

Cheng Qian got a bit of a toothache just from watching him. "Want a drink?"

"Yeah. This is cloying me to death."

The other made a hand sign. A small bit of frigid qi solidified in midair, turning into a lumpy cup that he passed over once he drew some water into it.

Han Yuan drank it dry in one gulp, then sighed. "The first sweet thing I ever ate in my life... was that pine nut candy."

"Our eldest gave it to you."

Han Yuan gave him a look. "*You* gave it to me. I thought it inconceivable, back then; I was thinking that if something so delicious had ever been around, those young beggars would have risked their lives fighting over it, yet you had actually given it to me so casually. You were either stupid, or too nice to me."

Cheng Qian smiled. "I was neither. I didn't like our eldest at the time, so I didn't feel like eating anything of his."

Han Yuan was quiet for a minute, then grinned. “That seems about right.” Immediately after that, he asked, “Is it okay?”

There was no need to elaborate; Cheng Qian knew that he was talking about Fuyao Mountain, so he gave a ho-hum nod. “It’s the same as ever... wait until you get back, so you can see it for yourself.”

Han Yuan paused, smiling grotesquely. “Don’t tease me, little senior. What did Master say to you, right before he died? ‘Those who unforgivably sin must be personally cleaned up by those of their sect.’ Did even you get affected by too much sugar?”

Cheng Qian turned his head to look at him steadily. “Are your sins unforgivable?”

The other’s expression slightly shifted, and in an instant visible to Cheng Qian, that cowardly Han Yuan ran off again, the one speaking with him turning into the heart demon.

Demon-Han Yuan shot him a lazy glance. “The Bureau is now as hated as a rat crossing the street, and as I see it, the imperial family is practically ruined, their good fortune exhausted. Someone will inevitably revolt. My anger has been vented, and my heart is light. Whether I’ve sinned or not is your call.”

Cheng Qian shook his head, dodging any answer. He looked at the frosted moonlight. “I’m going. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“I want milk cake, then.” Han Yuan rubbed his own stomach, then added, “It’s too sweet... makes you uncomfortable afterwards. Bring me half of a chicken, too.”

The other waved his hand. Shaung Ren shot out like a meteor, and he was gone.

By the time he returned to Fuyao, the banquet had already disbanded. He headed straight for his own Residence of Peace, where Teng Huang was awaiting him.

Noticing that he looked a bit tense, Teng Huang came forward and took his sword. “The Young— *Sect Leader* is here.”

“Mn. I came to study the Wish-Granting Stone of our sect’s forebears,” Sect Leader Yan covered up, and badly.

Cheng Qian glimpsed the legendary ‘offering for the Tower of No Regrets’ upon the Stone, only to see that a wine pot was impolitely placed upon it. He didn’t expose him. “What have you found?”

Yan Zhengming glanced at Teng Huang, who had just been transferred over to the Residence. The boy wasn’t too old, but he was clever. Immediately realizing that he was being an eyesore, he quickly found an excuse to flee.

“What did you go to do?” Yan Zhengming asked.

Cheng Qian didn’t answer, only smiling.

The other immediately understood, and asked no further, merely putting his extended hand onto the wine pot. “Don’t move. Wine is nothing to you, so I’ll pour a cup.”

Cheng Qian’s gaze landed upon the Stone, which he had used as padding to copy an unknowable amount of scriptures. Even when closing his eyes, he could silently count out the notches on its surface. He placed his hand upon it, and the light of remote orchids shining upon it made said hand as white as jade.

Yan Zhengming saying that he was looking at the stone had just been an excuse. At this moment, he started staring at Cheng Qian’s hand single-

mindedly, intermittently drinking as he also drank his junior in.

Cheng Qian suddenly frowned. “Huh?”

“What is it?” the other asked absently.

“I’m getting the sense that there’s something circulating inside the Stone.”

The Stone had been like a pond before, nothing more than dead, stagnant water. Now, though, he could sense light and shadow fluctuating within it, as if it was alive.

Hearing this, Yan Zhengming took out a small bottle from his sleeve, then squeezed out a few drops of grass juice-looking liquid from it. It spread out on the Stone’s surface, then quickly condensed into a square-cun film.

When looked at through the film, the texture of the stone appeared to be magnified by a countless number of times, making its exquisite quality clearly discernible.

Cheng Qian came in close. “What is this? Something of second brother’s making?”

“Mhm. It’s one thing he’s good for... this is called Blockeye Leaf Juice. It can generally be used for fine fluctuations or blinding techniques, where a few drops of it will magnify things to the surface.”

The two waited for a time, only to witness the liquid film completely vanishing, no change to be seen.

On the contrary, when Cheng Qian had approached, the airflow brought about by his breathing finely brushed against Yan Zhengming’s face, making his affection involuntarily drift about.

He stared at Cheng Qian's profile, but, upon remembering his own history, he leaned his upper body backwards and gave a dry cough. "It's been so many years. Maybe your senses are off?"

After that, his eyes vaguely peered around the inside of the Residence. "It's still quiet here. It always makes me feel that there's immortal qi in that bamboo forest out back, which would be suitable for seclusion."

He kind of regretted that as soon as he said it. Though he had planned to hang about here and not leave, he didn't want to sound like he was in such a hurry.

This feeling was unlike that of an eldest senior... but of a lecher. Those acting as senior brothers would always feel that it was bad to have a too-scant sense of shame.

Conversely, Cheng Qian had not heard his implication at all, and answered absent-mindedly, "You're going into seclusion?"

"..."

Unromantic idiot.

Cheng Qian then went on to make a lot of sense. "Right. You've been scrambling all over the place ever since you entered the Sword Spirit Realm, with no chance whatsoever to seclude yourself and consolidate your state. On top of that, I didn't have deep comprehension of swordwill when I refined that wooden sword, so you really should refine it again... um, what's wrong?"

Yan Zhengming looked at him sullenly.

"Is this about the wooden sword...?" Cheng Qian asked, understanding nothing. "...Haven't we already come out?"

Not only was it impossible for him to empathize well with others, but he was great at bringing up that which should not be spoken of.

Yan Zhengming stood up while carrying the wine pot. “You *wish*,” he said angrily. “Anyone ‘coming out’ with you would get mad just seeing you! I’m leaving.”

Cheng Qian rapidly went over the words he had just said in his head, then had a flash of realization. “Hey, senior!”

Yan Zhengming held some hope.

While the frost was heavy in the dead of night, Cheng Qian suddenly thought, *He came over without any proper business. Why would he just say a few things, then leave?*

As soon as that thought arose, his throat went a little dry, but then he thought, *If I tell him not to leave in the middle of the night, wouldn’t that be rude? He spazzes a lot; what if he doesn’t have that implication?*

After inwardly weighing things, he still felt it a bit rude, so his words took a turn.

“If you hate how noisy anyplace else is, you can come into seclusion here,” he said, heartfelt. “I’ll stand guard for you.”

I’ll seclude your head from your damn shoulders, Yan Zhengming thought. *You’re going to anger me to death.*

Thus, he made not a sound, and, using a pace that looked like a striding meteor, spent no less than an incense stick’s worth of time dawdling all the way to the Residence’s gate, where the doorsill of the small courtyard was wedged with non-existent mud.

Since you didn't keep me around, I can only go, Sect Leader Yan thought to himself, completely unhappy.

—

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Chapter 95

Yan Zhengming's soles nearly got stuck and came off. Cheng Qian was still watching him from afar, wanting to say something but stopping; he looked to be at a bit of a loss, and also helpless.

The other had been like this as a child; he had hated cold stools and would refuse to sit on them, standing there with a look full of displeasure as he said not a thing, waiting for his crowd of maidservants and Daolings to fathom his thoughts. With such a giant group of Daolings around, there had always been a few clever ones that could react in time and save him the talking.

What a shame it was that there was only the wooden lump named Cheng Qian around, and not anyone accustomed to this defect of his.

Humanity and divinity warred in Yan Zhengming's head for a minute, and then he suddenly figured a way out of his 'desperate situation', mind taking an unexpected turn. *Since he was so bold as to say that stuff in the Stone Seed, how about I be a bit shameless?*

Hence, he tilted his head back and drank down all the wine in the jade pot, the alcohol strengthening his resolve. Turning around his prow, he went for Cheng Qian with a dignified look, passed through the Residence's courtyard, and bluntly declared to him, "I'm not leaving today."

That change of face came quicker than the turn of a page. His mind was truly indiscernible.

Cheng Qian couldn't react. "Uh... wah?"

Yan Zhengming shot him a look. "What? Got something to say?"

Cheng Qian had nothing at all, only attempts at some words.

“Get that little Daoling of yours to draw bathwater for me,” the other ordered routinely.

Standing there in a daze, Cheng Qian’s imagination inadvertently ran wild for a moment, and he turned around and left in a panic, heart beating like mad.

The rear yard of the Residence had a tiny pond, which had ever-flowing, sweet-tasting water that was so clear, the bottom could be seen. A purifying charm had been placed at the bottom of the brook in the pond’s upper reaches, making the water therein drinkable.

Cheng Qian did not go bother Teng Huang, nor did he make use of anyone else, setting to work himself. With some unfamiliarity, he drew out a ring of charms to heat up the pond’s water; after no more than a moment, fog rolled off of it, making it look rather like an immortal realm.

He crouched by the pond to test its warmth himself. After a good deal of work, he suddenly felt like he had a cat that wasn’t easy to attend to; even though it was awfully troublesome, he was still happily serving it.

Right when he was about to stand up, Yan Zhengming, at some unknown point in time, had come to noiselessly stand behind him.

Making use of his negligible tipsiness, he drummed up his courage — before Cheng Qian had the time to stand all the way up, he hugged him by the waist.

In truth, his palms were sweaty, both of which he just now nonchalantly wiped off on Cheng Qian’s belt. At the exact same time, he dragged out a long, languid tone, also issuing a look of mellowness that was a complete

lie, to say, “This is a good place you have. Aren’t you going to bathe together with me?”

Cheng Qian was shortly quiet. “...Senior, why are you shaking?” he said automatically.

“...”

Beside this pond where immortal qi lingered, neither of them said anything for a time.

Cheng Qian realized that he had apparently flubbed things, quickly attempting to remedy them. “No, that’s—“

He didn’t get to finish his sentence as a forceful attack came from behind him, which was his humiliated-into-rage senior straight-up grabbing him and jumping into the pond. The water that was much too warm, in Cheng Qian’s opinion, quickly soaked through his clothes and enveloped him, making him shudder intensely. Before he could speak, Yan Zhengming had already pressed him into the edge of the pond, staring at him with burning eyes.

He lifted Cheng Qian’s head up with one hand, fingertips lightly tracing across his wet face and mind going blank for a short time. The hot water steamed the feeling of the alcohol up to his head.

Coming to this step, he resolved to just go for it, and kissed him without another word.

The water was hot, and the palms of his senior were even hotter. Cheng Qian suddenly couldn’t catch his breath, struggling slightly a bit involuntarily. As it was, with only this bit of movement, Yan Zhengming immediately let him go, cautiously drawing back a bit.

Cheng Qian wasn't that much more clear-headed than he was. Like a fish thrown out of water, he gasped for breath a few times, a faint ache in his chest as he met Yan Zhengming's ill-at-ease gaze — it carried unspeakable longing, and a fear to go beyond the acceptable limit.

After wracking his brain for a long time, Cheng Qian asked in a low, somewhat strained voice, "Senior, do you... want to dual cultivate with me?"

Yan Zhengming was speechless, feeling that he ought to just turn around, run out, and go cry right now. It would fit with the times.

"You sure grasp a lot, to even know what dual cultivation is," he snarled, not knowing how to react. "Dual cultivation, my ass! I just like you and want to be close to you, okay? Can I not do that?!"

"..."

Done roaring, Yan Zhengming stared at him tensely, then tentatively pecked the corner of his mouth. "Do you regret this?" he asked, touch-and-go.

The word 'close' beautifully invoked that scene Cheng Qian had witnessed in Zhaoyang, which he didn't have a good impression of, and had merely felt unbearable upon taking a rough look at.

That bit of unbearableness instead ignited unorthodox thoughts in his head, now. It was like back when he had been a teen and come out of the mountain cave, passed through the Valley of the Heart Demon, and gazed down from up on high; he had clearly felt indescribable danger, yet had still involuntarily stuck his head out to look.

"You're noisy," he said.

Guessing that this excitement had origins in abstinence, and shelving his memories of that superficial flower-viewing, he improperly tore off Yan Zhengming's soaked clothes. After he was done with that, though, he became a bit confused, not knowing where to go from there; thus, he paused, wringing the juices of his brain dry in an attempt to recall how other people did this.

He suddenly had some regrets that he hadn't observed closely, back then. This was the first time in all his life that he was really feeling the phrase, 'Regret not knowing more when the time to use that knowledge comes.'

...That was, until he was pressed into the wall of the pond by Yan Zhengming, with no room for question.

The other had been stifled for too long, born with it for too long, and no longer thought to be courteous with him.

Starting from then on, someone else began to claim ownership of the Residence of Peace.

On the first day Yan Zhengming stayed there, Cheng Qian had a rare bout of sleeping in late. He felt a sweetness in his heart upon opening his eyes to see Yan Zhengming. Despite having some slight, indescribable discomfort, it wasn't that big of a deal; Yan Zhengming only occasionally had such moments where he would be open and reveal his true feelings, so, just for that, Cheng Qian believed that he could do whatever it was that he wanted.

On the third day Yan Zhengming stayed there, however, Cheng Qian began to find it all a bit much. The other's fussing around had made the Residence of Peace neither peaceful nor quiet, and the guy was horribly clingy. Sect Leader Yan really had his own way of getting someone stuck to him, quite unlike a typical clinger — every time, he would merely vague a hint, and then, after demanding that the other accept it, immediately stick right back

to him, so that he could put on a lordly appearance that basically said, ‘Who made me be your senior brother? I *should* be coaxing you.’

Were Cheng Qian not to respond, or not feel like bothering with him every once in a while, he would have to prepare to get continuously nagged the whole day.

There was a saying: ‘Inviting spirits in is easy, sending them away is hard.’ Sect Leader Yan had been staying in the Residence of Peace for half a month now, and Cheng Qian couldn’t take it anymore, because he was about to go insane. He thought back to when he would have preferred to face the nearest wall than be willing to chat with Nian Mingming, a visiting guest; evidently, in addition to his staunch willpower, he was fond of the quiet.

After getting deliberately ignored several times by him, the noisy Sect Leader Yan finally got mad. “Didn’t you say that you would never fail to be loyal to me? You tired of me after only a few days! Just as expected from someone that’s been a white-eyed wolf since he was a boy!”

Cheng Qian got a headache. “Senior, can’t you let me live a few more years in peace?”

Sect Leader Yan got so angry, he ran out to the bamboo forest to refine his sword, then wrecked the bamboo sea into a bald expanse. He had wanted to leave, then, but ended up being unwilling to; when evening came, he furiously stomped through fine rain as he stormed back, after which he waited for Cheng Qian — who had gone down the mountain to see Han Yuan — to return and reflect upon his misdoings.

The days flickered past. In a wink, the rainy season of Fuyao had arrived, those pattering sounds never stopping all day long.

Today, when Cheng Qian was about to go down the mountain, Yan Zhengming called out to stop him.

“Bring this over to him.” This was the first time that the other had ever brought Han Yuan up, and he threw out a small pearl that was as big as a fava bean.

Cheng Qian caught it. The thing felt cold to the touch, yet the humidity of the pattering rainwater coiling around him suddenly dissipated.

“Anti-Water Drops flowed out of the Western Palace in its early years; I managed to obtain a few pearls,” Yan Zhengming explained. “Tang Zhen’s established appointment on the fifteenth is coming soon. Prevent him from being a drowned chicken-looking disgrace.”

Clearly, he was concerned at heart, yet always donned a look of unending and absolute disdain.

Before Cheng Qian went to see Han Yuan, he first bumped into Tang Zhen at the foot of Tai Yin.

Tang Zhen was a very worry-free guest. Apart from the first day he had arrived at Fuyao, where Li Yun had personally led him on a tour of the Mountain, he pretty much lived a simple life of seclusion, rarely leaving the courtyard of his guest house.

He held an oilpaper umbrella in hand, to not waste his true essence blocking the rain. The sleeves of his robes were damp, but he didn’t mind, calmly walking in the rain.

Cheng Qian let Shuang Ren descend to the ground, then called out to greet him. “Brother Tang.”

“Are you heading to the Ten-Party Array?” Tang Zhen asked. “We can go together.”

The two didn’t speak much, nor did they go by swordflight, walking down the small mountain path that was getting washed clean. The sound of wind and rain in the ears was so fine, it was like everything had slowed down.

“With you accompanying me, Brother Tang, I feel like I don’t need to be so worried about it all.”

“Mortals have lives of mediocrity, pursued by merits, fame, benefits, and fortune. A cultivator has a hundred or thousandfold that amount of time, yet they are still pursued behind by their cultivation base and realm. We all walk against the currents between the Heavens and the Earth; with one tiny moment of slack, one will get a step further away from the Great Dao. You must not dare be unworried... I’m a walking corpse that seeks nothing, so it’s only natural that I’m a bit more carefree than others.”

Those words made some doubt slightly flit past Cheng Qian’s mind. *If you don’t seek anything, what are you scurrying over there for?*

However, that doubt went away in a flash. He didn’t have many friends, meaning every one counted, and he wasn’t too willing to be unduly suspicious of them. Thus, he didn’t care too much while he answered. “I think that occasionally taking a stroll is balancing, but if you pass every day so leisurely, wouldn’t you be just like an old tortoise? There would be no meaning to it.”

Tang Zhen smiled, then diverted the subject. “The appointment for the fifteenth will be here soon. What is your Sect Leader thinking of doing? In this battle, the demonic dragon bowed its head, the Celestial Divination Bureau fell, the Four Sages weakened, and over half of Mulan Mountain’s elites were destroyed. The other minor sects are not enough to bring up, but

Fuyao might be a new power. You all need to plan ahead in the reshuffling of the decks amongst the major sects.”

“Our Sect Leader doesn’t have the ambition to give orders to the whole world and have all four cardinal directions bowing towards him, he just wants to make strangers annoy him less. He used to be too lazy to leave the sect, and with so many years of wandering abroad, I’m thinking that he’s probably going to get even worse after coming back here.”

“Whether in his capacity as a Sect Leader or a sword cultivator, Brother Yan is quite distinctive. His mindset of letting things come as they may is very in-line with the true meaning of the Great Dao. Coupled with his unsurpassed natural aptitude, he might actually be able to aim for eternal life in the future.”

Since Fuyao’s establishment, there had never been a demand for eternal life, as it only considered itself to be of the ‘path of humanity’. World-shaking talents such as Tong Ru had even placed the sect’s inheritance before personal cultivation progression. Still, Tang Zhen was ultimately an outsider, so Cheng Qian didn’t answer with much. “Thank you for your auspicious words, Brother Tang.”

“But, if we’re speaking of eternal life, *you* have received the Heavens’ sole blessing.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Cultivation and tool refinement are sometimes one and the same. The Third Prince refining himself into the Skeletonizing Array had that same logic. Cultivators’ practice is a desperate struggle against the Heavens; if their base stagnates, new qi cannot be transferred into their true essence, and their lifespans will be capped. You, however, are not the same. The Spirit-Collection Jade is able to absorb the energy of the world by nature.”

Cheng Qian didn't care much about this. "Jade and humans are similar, in that neither will rot together with the Heavens and the Earth. Upon arriving at this stage of having a primordial spirit via different means, I don't feel any different."

"There's more," Tang Zhen answered mildly. "You forged the Jade into a form of flesh. You underwent a heavenly tribulation, so you have a half-immortal body. If you were willing to purely cultivate inside Mingming Valley's ice pool, it would incessantly supply you with true essence that came from the same origin as your corporeal body. Your cultivation base would never stagnate. You might not ascend, but you could live forever... oh, don't think that I'm advising you to. This is simply reality."

With a speaker like Tang Zhen, it was unclear whether he had ulterior motives or not, but a listener like Cheng Qian would only take those words as wind past the ears, anyways. "I only borrowed the Jade to make myself a body, since being human is nice. I really have no intention to turn into an actual jade piece."

Tang Zhen looked at him profoundly, saying nothing other than an agreement. "Right you are."

"Speaking of spiritual items, you're very knowledgeable, Brother Tang. Have you ever heard of 'Hear the Universe' before?"

The other's expression changed. "How do you figure that 'Hear the Universe' is a spiritual object, and not a person or a technique?"

Cheng Qian smiled, unfazed. "It just felt like one. Why?"

"Ah, that's a very ancient legend. Some claim that one can hear the sounds of the higher realms by wielding Hear the Universe, but no one knows whether that's true or not." Immediately after this, Tang Zhen's tone took a turn as he exposed the matter at hand. "Zhenren Han has qi deviated, so I'm

afraid the death penalty is unavoidable for him. It will be difficult for him to escape hardships. On the fifteenth, I will contend as much as possible. Even if he's to be imprisoned and suppressed, I will fight for him to be held on Fuyao Mountain."

Cheng Qian could only sigh. "Thank you very much, then."

It was nice thought, but unfortunately, it might not get implemented.

By the time the Fuyao crowd reached Tai Yin on the fifteenth day, there were already a lot of sects present.

The people that had arrived were high-class, but not too high-class. The various sects had successively gone back home to recuperate, and now had only sent a representative or two to express their positions. The major sects were sitting all around and separated, but the middle position was left open.

Cheng Qian glanced at Tang Zhen, and the latter nodded. "That's indeed been reserved for your sect."

They reserved that, but am I about to step forth and sit there like a duck forced to roost? Yan Zhengming thought.

Not saying a word further, he meandered through the crowd. Having the same mannerisms as ever and not showing care for anyone else's face, he found a nook that didn't wallow in the muck with the crowd, ordered Nian Dada to throw out the Stone Seed, and thus partitioned out a tiny world that he went into without prior consultation.

Tang Zhen shook his head. He called for Liu Lang to go up onto the Ten-Party Array's platform; he was ultimately the one that had congregated this congregation, so he couldn't stand on the sidelines like Fuyao could.

The Stone Seed displayed a bit of extraordinariness that left behind the world and stood alone. Liu Lang couldn't resist admiring that slightly. "I wish to have a day where I'll become just like Sect Leader Yan."

Tang Zhen patiently tilted his head, listening to him talk as he walked.

"I heard the Daolings on Fuyao Mountain say that he was like this as a teenager, too. All he wanted to do was plant flowers and play with birds. Later on, destiny made him descend the mountain for a hundred years, and after a journey of suffering, he's become a superpower, but even so, upon returning to the place he started off at, his original goals are unchanged, and he isn't the slightest bit moved by the ways of the world... setting aside that his original aspirations seem to be lackluster, I really admire him."

Tang Zhen nodded expressionlessly at that. "That is truly rare."

Immediately following that, however, he raised his head again, gaze apathetically sweeping over the cultivators that filled the eyes. "It's a shame that he is unmoved by the ways of the world, yet the ways of the world are not likely to tolerate him," he said, traces of gloom within his tone. "People like him typically don't have good ends."

With that, before Liu Lang could answer, he swept out his sleeves and walked to the remnant array site.

After perfunctorily giving a few pleasantries for the occasion, Tang Zhen got right to point. "This Tang dares not take control of things on my own initiative, so I will have to inconvenience everyone with deliberating over a statute today. I personally believe that retribution for grievances is not necessarily a good thing, and that death may not see atonement for the crime. What do you all say?"

When his voice had only just landed, an elder of White Tiger Estate took the lead in speaking. "The Nine Sages of the Nightmare Travelers perished

in the Ten-Party Array, and the demonic dragon is being detained here. Now, no one is managing those demonic cultivators. The Nine Sages and demonic dragon were bound by the blood oath, but it didn't bind those demons that acknowledge no laws nor gods. They are inhibited by no one, each of them causing chaos to instead make even more of a foul atmosphere. As I see it, it would be better to—"

Han Yuan was completely uncooperative, cutting him off without the least bit of gratitude. "The Nightmare Travelers have never restrained their subordinates. If you want to blame someone, blame yourselves for your incompetence and failure to take care of your own territory. Don't count on me to go manage them for you."

The elder didn't personally know Han Yuan; he had simply been entrusted with saying a few good things on his behalf. This was the first time he had ever come across someone that was so uncaring of what was right and wrong, making him choke.

"Since the demon's said as much himself, what else can anyone expect?" someone beside him said coldly. "It would be better to kill him to get rid of him."

The speaker happened to be Bian Xu, Master of Black Tortoise Hall. Someone with his status should not have been coming to mix in with this himself, but the enmity of having his son killed made it so that he couldn't live under the same sky as Han Yuan. Bian Xiaohui had only been dead for a year, yet Bian Xu had a thoroughly white beard and hair, faintly showing the desolation that came when one's time was up.

He, too, was a Sage. Him falling to this plight truly caused one to sigh.

"Wouldn't it be, though?" Han Yuan responded with equal harshness. "Making the demons and the trash all die out, then leaving only you ever-so-knowledgeable, Dao-devoted people would be pretty nice."

Inside the Stone Seed, Yan Zhengming said to Li Yun, “Can you make that dumbass shut up?”

The other frowned. “Bian Xu? That’d be quite a bit difficult.”

“...I was talking about Han Yuan.”

“Sure.” Li Yun turned to Cheng Qian. “Do you see that big wutong tree opposite Han Yuan? Xiao Qian, take our sister there. He’ll definitely shut up, then.”

“...”

After a short moment, Shui Keng transformed into a big bird, then flew out of the Stone Seed while carrying Cheng Qian. She landed beneath the wutong tree, in prime position to have a staring contest with Han Yuan.

Her fire-red crane feathers hung down, looking particular eye-catching. Once Han Yuan, who had been raving on the platform, saw the two of them, he instantly sealed up his mouth and obediently made no more sounds.

“Our little junior has met with a lot of calamities in his life. It could even be said to be filled with blood and tears, but if you really add things up, it’s actually Xiao Qian’s death that hit him the hardest,” Li Yun said, utterly self-satisfied. “Haven’t you noticed that his heart demon weakens a little every time he meets him?... There’s also our junior sister, who was the best with him when she was young. On that day, when his demonic nature boomed, he said that he wanted to draw out her yao skeleton, which makes him somewhat guilty-feeling towards her. He always restrains his heart demon whenever he sees her.”

He shook his head proudly, feeling himself to be quite capable of prescribing just the right medication.

Yan Zhengming unhappily smacked him with the spine of his fan.
“I *haven't* noticed. Shut up,” he squeezed out from between his teeth.

Li Yun went quiet, feeling himself to have apparently overturned someone's vinegar jar without knowing it.

As Bian Xu's seniority was presented, it wouldn't be good for him to lack too much elegance; when it came to quarreling, as long as Han Yuan remained calm, it would be hard for him to clap with one hand, and he would have to give in after not very long. All he could throw out was, “Forgive this old decrepit for not having perfect cultivation. Dispelling the hatred of the murder of one's child is difficult. My Black Tortoise Hall cannot live under the same sky as this man! He must be killed today!”

As soon as that came out, everyone's hostility towards Han Yuan was momentarily evoked. A mess of talking arose.

Right then, a voice suddenly came from far away. “The demonic dragon's guilt has manifested, and the whole world knows about it. If none of us had any grievances with him, there would be no need to mobilize everyone into convening here. Our enmities do not need to be brought up. I believe that Zhenren Tang has spoken some sense — what meaning does the finality of death have? It would be better to allow him to live and atone.”

Everyone looked over at the same time to see a middle-aged man walking over from far-off with a couple disciples, looking like his figure could come before the eyes in a flash already. He was elegant, graceful, and had quite a refined presence.

The White Tiger Estate elder that had just spoken greeted him immediately. “Estate Lord.”

So *that* was who he was.

The Estate Lord nodded, tidied his cuffs, then cupped his hands towards Bian Xu. “Brother Bian. Long time, no see.”

Cheng Qian furrowed his brow as he sized the newcomer up from the treetops. Then, his eyes widened — wasn’t this clown that old lunatic from the Immortal Binding Platform, Ji Qianli?

Why was he putting on airs all of a sudden?!

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Chapter 96

Upon seeing this old friend, Bian Xu was startled, his mood becoming a little complicated immediately afterwards.

His own hairs were all white, but his old friend before him was still in his prime, the superior one immediately evident when both sides were compared. Cultivators had lifespans that were several times that of mortals, the youth and beauty of non-age making them appear to be blessed by the Heavens, but there was a cruel side to that, too — they were allowed to show ugliness, ignorance, and poverty, but it was age alone that they could never show.

That was because ‘age’ was not only a law of nature, but the judging phrase of ‘having no affinity with the Great Dao for all one’s life.’

Bian Xu refused to admit that he was jealous, but did feel slightly upset. In the end, he said not a thing, nodding mildly at Ji Qianli.

Everyone below began to converse with gusto. Hearsay stated that White Tiger Estate’s Lord had been seriously injured due to eliminating demons, and after so many years of straight rest in recuperation, all of the Estate’s matters had been handed down to its elders while he struggled for his life.

However, it now seemed that instead of having a tiny bit of a hint that his wick was about to go out, he was hale and hearty.

Ji Qianli looked up to see Cheng Qian atop the tree, shot him a smile, then called out to Tang Zhen from a distance. “I will say, everyone — those of you that have grudges need to think about this. What good would destroying his primordial spirit with one slash be, when he doesn’t fear death? His death would end it all, no suffering to be had. Are you all comfortable with that? If *I* had an enemy I couldn’t live under the same sky

with, I would definitely be itching for them to suffer the utmost of disgrace every single day, while also having a long, healthy life.”

As soon as the Estate Lord opened his mouth, a wave of fresh shit-stirring sticks pummeled the face. Han Yuan looked to really want to cuss the guy out, but he was so pissed off, he couldn't think up anything good to say for a minute.

This man's sudden appearance was beyond anyone's expectations. Even Tang Zhen couldn't fathom why he had come.

“Your words do not lack reason, Estate Lord,” Tang Zhen calmly stated, “but Zhenren Han's abilities are far too remarkable. If we want to lock him away, there needs to be a suitable place for it.”

“What would a suitable place be in your opinion, Zhenren Tang?” someone asked.

Tang Zhen cupped his hands towards the asker. “The affairs of all the major sects are quite complex, so I'm afraid they wouldn't be able to manage him. I'm also afraid that everyone else would have the will, but not the strength to. Hum... when the Skeletonizing Array broke last month, did any of you get an impression of Sect Leader Yan's cultivation base and sword skills?”

Of course they had. It was a pretty deep impression. How many sword cultivators could cultivate to a primordial spirit? How many could enter the Sword Spirit Realm?

Tang Zhen smiled. “That is why, in my humble view, Fuyao Mountain would be a good place.”

As soon as he said that, Ji Qianli, whose standpoint was unclear, suddenly interjected. “I don't think that's appropriate.”

Tang Zhen's eye twitched a bit.

Hands behind his back, Ji Qianli stepped forth, shooting a glance at Cheng Qian on the treetop. "The Fuyao Sect is Han Yuan's original sect. Even if Sect Leader Yan is righteous and won't give in to personal feelings, would this not be the equivalent of all of you trapping him in a situation where he's innocent, yet suspicious? It's not appropriate, not appropriate at all — isn't that right, my little friend, Cheng Qian?"

Cheng Qian vaguely sensed the surging undercurrent of this scene, but was momentarily unable to make out the whys and wheres of it. Thus, he said nothing.

Right then, someone spoke into his ear. "How do you know *him*, too? How do you know such an embarrassment?"

Upon turning his head, he saw that their eldest, who had ignored the crowd leaving him a front-row seat to run off and build the Stone Seed before anything else, was currently not waiting in said Seed. The stately Sect Leader had instead come and scrambled up into this tree like a monkey.

Cheng Qian: "..."

Who exactly was the one that was embarrassment, here?

"I actually have a proposal." Ji Qianli became grave, strode with a slow gait over to Tang Zhen's side, and looked at Han Yuan.

The latter got the overall feeling that the man's gaze held a weird sort of pity. It gave him bad goosebumps to see it.

"I went traveling with my disciples a time before, and saw that a generation in Shuzhong had been scourged by demonic cultivators several times, its people unable to pull through life. Those cultivators' bases are, for the most

part, nothing, and will surely be no big challenge for all present to deal with, though the sheer amount of them will be a bit of a bother. Also...” Ji Qianli waved his sleeve, and then a gray figure flew out of it. It was a tiny girl whose entire body was gray and black, and from the waist down, her form was practically too blurry to see clearly. She floated in midair sullenly, a dead look in her eyes, indescribable resentful and ghostly qi coming off of her.

“A ghost?” Yan Zhengming whispered.

There was a burst of clamor inside the Ten-Party Array.

With a face like his whole life was flashing past his eyes, akin to mist, Tang Zhen looked like he had been slapped — perhaps, he was thinking back to the days where he himself had been a ghost. He automatically took a step back.

“Correct,” Ji Qianli said. “I came here specifically to inform all of you that the Soul-Devouring Lamp, once vanished for a hundred years, has reappeared in the human world.”

This remark set off a thousand different waves. Everyone erupted on the spot.

Over a hundred years ago, the Soul-Devouring Lamp had appeared, creating countless slaughters. Its holder, Jiang Peng, had come from unknown origins, yet had an unparalleled time in the demonic cultivators’ limelight. There had once been rumors that he’d had the capability to aspire for Beiming — and if it was said that the demonic dragon was trouble, *he* at least had things he would never do, while a ghost cultivator’s methods had no such bottom line.

One wave had not yet settled before another arose. These archdemons were like mosquitoes after the start of summer, where swatting them to wipe

them out never ended.

“I met him outside of Mingming Valley before, then accidentally let him get away...” Cheng Qian whispered. “Has he really refined himself into the Soul-Devouring Lamp already?”

Yan Zhengming tightly hooked him around the waist. “Why didn’t you say so back then?”

“...I was getting bugged by you, so I forgot.”

The other looked at him with an angry face, but unfortunately, Cheng Qian calmly looking back at him put out his immense fire. Not pulling a long face, Sect Leader Yan’s eyes involuntarily softened up, whereupon he had no choice but to push Cheng Qian’s face to the side. “Look over there, not at me.”

“Seniors, there’s another living creature here,” the overlooked Shui Keng said dryly.

He looked at her.

Having understood the threat, she turned her bird head away in distress.

“Ah, it’s fine. This living creature just so happens to be blind.”

Ji Qianli’s group whispering to each other gradually quieted down, after which he turned to Han Yuan. “You have been running rampant amongst the Nightmare Travelers for untold years, and thus have considerably deep experience in the demonic path. Would you be willing to lend us a hand, now?”

Han Yuan peered at him with a cold smile.

“The Soul-Devouring Lamp has not been present for a hundred years,” Tang Zhen suddenly said, “and but a single ghost doesn’t necessarily mean you’re telling the truth. In light of your undertone, Estate Lord, would this not be tantamount to sending the demonic dragon back to Nanjiang? These various sects have run into a lot of incidents and lost quite a lot in order to hunt down the demonic dragon. If you want to let the tiger return to his mountain, others may not agree.”

He distorted Ji Qianli’s words to perfection, and said distortion appeared to make sense.

“I don’t understand, Second Brother,” Shui Keng said quietly. “Why does Senior Tang seem to want to protect Fourth Brother one minute, then not the next?”

Cheng Qian placed his hand on her head, not making a sound, though both he and Yan Zhengming had heard. Tang Zhen wanted to protect Han Yuan, yet wasn’t agreeing to let him go back to Nanjiang... why?

Ji Qianli smiled. “That’s simple. Why, have you forgotten, Zhenren Tang? Your eight-trigrams plate with the blood oath is still around, isn’t it? Since we could set one up, we can naturally set another one up. Not only can the demonic dragon be made to take part, but it can even getl us... *Sect Leader Yan* and the rest over, for everyone to discuss its clauses. You established an appointment last month for the fifteenth, Zhenren Tang. Han Yuan could have just scampered off, yet he has peacefully been sitting here for a month in wait for you all. Does that not clearly demonstrate the effect of the blood oath?”

Tang Zhen put away all the emotions on his face, as blank as a wooden carving.

“If otherwise, would all of you prefer to go contend with the Soul-Devouring Lamp and a legion of ghosts yourselves? Would you prefer to

sort out those demons with not much power, yet many means yourselves?”

Bian Xu suddenly butt in. “Tell us, then. How should this debt of blood be repaid?”

His tone was completely impolite, a nearly confrontational question. There was silence on the field.

Ji Qianli went silent for a minute. “Brother Bian, the dead cannot come back to life. Falling into prejudice will put your cultivation at a disadvantage. You should feel as much.”

Getting his sore spot jabbed, Bian Xu’s face fiercely twitched. Han Yuan, however, just laughed. “I could repay it with my life for you.”

Upon hearing this, Tang Zhen took back his gaze and placed it upon Han Yuan. “Han Yuan. Cultivators need to speak and act prudently,” he said slowly. “At times, what one says will be spilt water that is difficult to retrieve. Think carefully before words come out of your mouth next time.”

Han Yuan hadn’t necessarily been speaking from his original mind, likely just habitually being provocative for one moment of delight. Tang Zhen’s admonishment was not really necessary. Han Yuan’s heart demon was trapped by the phrase, ‘getting ordered around makes me want to disobey’; what he could not bear to hear the most was disparaging comments and threats. Tang Zhen saying something like this might make him swear by the Heavens to repay with his life!

Cheng Qian’s heart thumped. Despite being unwilling to guess at Tang Zhen’s intent with a suspicious frame of mind, he still felt some difficulty come up within him.

“Shh, it’s fine,” Yan Zhengming said. “Look.”

During his speech, Han Yuan had already made a vowing gesture, but right as he went to speak, his expression suddenly changed. His entire body appeared to be frozen exactly in place, mouth opening a couple of times with not a sound coming out.

Cheng Qian gathered true essence into his eyes — he saw that Han Yuan appeared to be bundled up tightly in a layer of water film, prompting him to remember the ‘Anti-Water Pearl’ Yan Zhengming had told him to deliver a while before.

Just as expected... when Han Yuan became trapped on the remnant site of the Ten-Party Array, Yan Zhengming had itched for hailstones to smash down upon the other’s head every single day. Why would he have so nicely prepped an Anti-Water Pearl for him?

“That’s an ‘Anti-Oath Pearl’,” Yan Zhengming whispered. “Place it on the body for one shichen, and one won’t be able to make any oaths for three days. I feared that he would say some nonsense.”

Something so weird and useless was definitely Li Yun’s work.

He then frowned, and said to himself, “What’s up with Tang Zhen? Did he take the wrong meds?”

After this interruption, Ji Qianli finally caught an opportunity to speak to Bian Xu. “Your Black Tortoise Hall is located in the ice fields of the extreme North, separated by Nanjiang by hundreds of thousands of li. It naturally has nothing to be concerned over, but does your Hall manage the turmoil of the Central Plains?”

As he spoke, he raised his hand to point at the little mid-air ghost. Agitated by his force, she abruptly pounced forward, the several cultivators closest to her getting up and dodging in a panic.

This old man of White Tiger Estate would either not show up, or show up start stuff.

However, no one dared to say as much to his face, as he was one of the Four Sages.

“I proclaim that the blood oath be as follows,” he started, lackadaisically. “First, the demonic dragon must do all he is capable of doing to arrest the demonic cultivators running amok in the Central Plains and the Soul-Devour Lamp, else he will take a tenfold backlash. Second, after catching the Soul-Devouring Life, the dragon will be confined to Nanjiang and guard its entrance for all his life, never to take a half-step out of it, else he will suffer tenfold backlash. Third, since the dragon is serving this sentence, he’ll need to bear with a daily flogging for five hundred years, only to be cut short if he dies of old age, else he will suffer tenfold backlash. Fourth, from now on, the dragon must not wantonly slaughter innocents, create demonic weaponry, accept disciples, or teach, else he will be struck with lightning and die horribly.”

Saying so, he waved his hand, and the eight-trigram plate that had overseen a blood oath once before flew right into his hand. He smiled as he took a survey of his surroundings. “I brought up the blood oath, but the dragon studied under Fuyao Sect, so I’ll need to ask Sect Leader Yan to take the oath alongside me in representation of the Sect. If, someday, anyone plays favorites to the dragon, their sect will decline to an unredeemable state, its bloodline cut off — I presume that no one here has any other opinions?”

Anyone with opinions dared not say anything, quelled by his string of ‘tenfold backlash’s and the ‘struck with lightning’.

Ji Qianli took the initiative to force out a drop of blood from his fingertip, which submerged straight into the plate, after which he took and flung it right towards that giant parasol tree.

Everyone held their breaths for a moment. The plate was seen to circle around the tree's dense canopy for long time, and then a hand suddenly caught it. Yan Zhengming, hidden in the canopy, moved branches aside, gave a profound look to Ji Qianli up on the high platform, then dripped a drop of blood onto the plate — the Fuyao Sect had entered the oath.

Seeing the plate fly towards Han Yuan, Tang Zhen was about to reach out his hand to stop it. "Sect Leader Yan, you should consider this carefully before..."

Yet, he did not get to finish, as the plate bypassed him to get to Han Yuan.

The instant Fuyao had entered the oath, Han Yuan gained the symbol of the pledge upon his body.

He stared at the symbol, thoroughly dumbstruck.

This...

After all this time, his senior hadn't expelled him from the sect! He was still one of Fuyao's!

In this moment, Han Yuan didn't feel a bit of anger at being forced into an oath. He quickly raised his head to look at Yan Zhengming on the tree, lips trembling slightly, yet saying nothing.

Tang Zhen's expression twisted up — the blood oath had already been made.

Cheng Qian, however, inwardly sighed, feeling an empty peace of mind.

For the sake of Han Yuan's personal vendetta, the human world had been overturned into a horrible state. Wanting to expose the past like human lives

were no big deal would be impossible. He had made an immense mistake, and needed to pay an immense price — no one could protect him from that.

Otherwise, aside from those enemies and detractors not agreeing with it, the karmic law of the Heavens wouldn't sit idly by, either.

Allowing him to live to atone was already him slipping the net. Regardless of whether he would be confined on Fuyao Mountain or ordered to stand guard at Nanjiang, it would be the best result.

With the stances of Fuyao and White Tiger Estate settled, no one else could say anything in regards to either emotions or logic. They successively stepped forwards to add their witness to the oath plate.

In the twilight of the setting sun, the dust of the matter settled.

When everyone began to leave, Ji Qianli cast aside his Estate disciples to come towards Cheng Qian. He looked him up and down. "It's been a long time since I've seen you. You've made improvement, and have a good future outlook."

"Estate Lord Ji," the other responded.

'Ji Qianli' smiled. "Don't call me that, [\[3\]](#) I was just messing with you last time. You don't blame me for locking your junior up, eh?"

The name of White Tiger Estate's Lord was Shang Wan'nian. Apart from a few people that didn't pay attention to what went on outside of their windows — like Cheng Qian — everyone knew that.

Cheng Qian slightly bowed his head. "How could I dare to?"

Estate Lord Shang looked at him, smiling lightly. "In muddy waters, someone will inevitably want to fish. In poor planning, someone will

inevitably shine a dagger. I'm afraid that the weather is going to change. You need to be careful."

With that, he looked down to view the spot on his hand where the symbol of the blood oath was fading away, smiling craftily. "But, then again, that will have nothing to do with us old fellows."

Cheng Qian was startled.

Shang Wan'nian brought out some familiar derangement once more, humming as he went. "After I die, how could I care about what tall floods he brings?"

He suddenly stepped forward, nearly bumping into Cheng Qian. He grabbed Cheng Qian's lapels, his eyes, so deep that their bottoms could not be seen, were like two eerie, black wells that stared unblinking at him.

Then, a thread of spiritual consciousness entered the middle of Cheng Qian's brows.

He heard the other's consciousness speak. *Long ago, Hear the Universe was disguised as a piece of spiritual jade, where it wandered the world. No one should have been able to recognize it, and I don't know why it fell into your hands. Since this is Heaven's will... well, don't let anyone know that you have it. Remember this.*

This pose of his was too ambitious. The very next moment, a hand stuck itself in out of nowhere, bringing Cheng Qian backwards and lithely pushing Shang Wan'nian away.

Yan Zhengming took back his paw, straightening up his sleeve like nothing had happened. "Hello, Estate Lord. Please conduct yourself with dignity," he stated, expressionless.

Cheng Qian: "..."

In other words, that inexplicable 'ear' on the back of his hand was Hear the Universe. He furrowed his brow; he genuinely hadn't informed anyone of this, but had brought it up to Tang Zhen once. Would the other suspect something?

Cheng Qian didn't have many friends, but Tang Zhen counted as one. Making him speculate about an old friend like this suddenly made him feel like his chest was weighted down by a puddle of cold, sticky mud, making it hard for him to breathe.

"Estate Lord, hold on..."

Right as he was wanting to ask what 'Hear the Universe' was, Shang Wan'nian drew a few steps back then put his finger against his lips in a silencing gesture.

After that, the old lunatic pointed to his own eyes, then his ears, then finally his mouth, and shook his head three times in a row — not looking, not listening, not speaking.

Once done, he lowered his head. A smile of indescribable connotation suffused his face, and he turned with his hands behind his back, striding towards Han Yuan. "My little Han friend, you can come down from the Ten-Party Array. I came uninvited today, so I ask to accompany you back to Fuyao Mountain for a temporary stay. Once two days pass, the journey will begin. You will come with me down to Shuzhong, then go back to Nanjiang. Oi, don't pull a long face. This happened because of you, so making you clean it up now is only natural."

Yan Zhengming eyebrows nearly flew off of his face. "An uninvited guest doesn't need my approval?" he mumbled, depressed.

The ‘hahaha’ of Shang Wan’ nian’s laughter came from the distance, just in time to answer his question.

Yan Zhengming got serious, shot a glance at Cheng Qian, who had a heavy load on his mind, and Shui Keng, who was bent out of shape, then grabbed Cheng Qian’s wrist. “Let’s go.”

Shui Keng followed after without a care, looking extraordinarily please and optimistic. “Eldest brother, is fourth brother coming home now?”

He simply did not feel like paying attention to her. “What did Tang Zhen mean?” he quietly asked. “Did he say anything to you before, Xiao Qian?”

Cheng Qian knit his brows tight, a monster knot in his heart. “He told me that he wanted to protect Han Yuan by confining him on Fuyao Mountain.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Shui Keng asked.

“Good, my ass. So that’s what he meant,” Yan Zhengming answered.

“Could you not tell? His implication also was, ‘if this person cannot remain in Fuyao Mountain, kill him for security.’”

Cheng Qian’s hand glanced over Shuang Ren’s sheath. Before the final moment, where the proof was concrete and the truth came to light, he would be willing to pardon Tang Zhen for all of his cover ups. He didn’t want to suspect him of anything.

Even though friendships between noblemen were not very intimate, they required the bare minimum of trust. However, he had no choice but to admit that this time, their eldest was right.

“They’re going to look for the Soul-Devouring Lamp,” he said. “I’ll go with them.”

“I’ll go, too!” Shui Keng chirped.

“No chance,” Yan Zhengming overruled. “The instant you leave my line of sight, something’s definitely going to happen.

“As for you...” He looked over at Shui Keng, then chided her with no bit of politeness. “What are you making noise for? Shut your beak!”

Cheng Qian wanted to say something further, but the other waved his hand to interrupt him. “There’s no need to say anything else. Tomorrow, I’ll find Shang Wan’nian to chat with him, and get a feel for the situation... is that old thing really one of the Four Sages? Why is he kind of insane?”

Their eldest was extremely perceptive in the field of picking out peoples’ faults, forever able to grasp main points.

That very night, Cheng Qian couldn’t sleep. With difficulty, he managed to get out of Yan Zhengming’s tangled limbs, then enter meditation in the Residence of Peace’s secluded courtyard.

Even so, he was unable to calm down, getting the overall sense that something was about to happen.

All of a sudden, the door to the yard was forcefully pushed open by someone. Upon opening his eyes, he saw Li Yun, whose face was as sunken as water. “Is our eldest here?”

“Why?”

“Estate Lord Shang is dead.”

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Yan Zhengming walked out of the bedroom, not a bit of tiredness to be seen on his face. He raised one hand and pressed it down upon Cheng Qian's stiff shoulder. "How did he die? I didn't sense anything at all. How could a superpower like Shang Wan'nian die without any commotion?"

As the rightful successor of the Sect Leader Seal, he could sense even a bit of stirring grass on the Mountain, his spiritual consciousness able to sweep over Yao Valley in the back range. He was much more potent at it than Zhenren Muchun had been, half-dead as he possessed the body of a weasel.

"I don't know." Li Yun pinched the bridge of his nose. "There's a White Tiger Estate kid that hasn't yet entered the Dao. In the middle of the night, he saw that the light was on in the other's room, and that the shadow cast on the window was a little weird. Once he stepped forward to question him, he discovered that he was already deceased. C'mon, follow me and we'll take a look."

Various possible conspiracies rose and fall in Cheng Qian's head as he got up with heavy worries.

As soon as he did, the hand that had caught Hear the Universe suddenly seemed to be burning up, though there were no abnormalities on the surface of its smooth skin. It shook violently, soon after which that scorching sensation rapidly spread from his hand to his arm, then engulfed his entire body.

He went off-balance for a spell. Shuang Ren, which had been hanging from his waist, fell off of him without warning, vibrating as it gave off a buzzing drone.

Yan Zhengming and Li Yun had been conversing, but once they turned their heads, they noticed that Cheng Qian wasn't making a peep — and then, after swaying a few times, he knelt right on the ground, complexion as hard-to-look-at as a dead man's. Yan Zhengming's soul was frightened right out of him.

Cheng Qian instinctively gripped Shuang Ren's sheath, its formerly ice-cold sword body seeming to slowly heat up. Everything in his surroundings was shifting away from him. He heard a certain sound that was like the tones of yellow bells from ancient times, the clamor heavy and overpowering, churning up his inner sanctum. His primordial spirit, which he had not yet had time to fully fix, could not withstand such heavy damage, and seemed like it was going to split open, suffering a bout of being cut to pieces for no real reason.

At exactly that moment, external force suddenly rushed into him, which instantly disconnected those layers of clamor, and suppressed his rampaging true essence.

Cheng Qian swallowed down the irony taste into his chest. He focused his spirit into his inner sanctum, only to see that a powerful, yet not forceful spiritual consciousness had been born into a false image — it was the purportedly-dead Shang Wan'nian.

The other looked at Cheng Qian's primordial spirit with furrowed brows. "What's wrong with you? Why is this damaged?"

Cheng Qian couldn't saying anything for a bit.

Sighing as he looked at him, Shang Wan'nian's consciousness spread out. His entire likeness turned into a cluster of infinite stars in the same spot, and he gradually helped him comb out his disordered true essence. "Your primordial spirit is damaged, so you can't withstand Hear the Universe's

inheritance... alas, I can only lock it away inside your inner sanctum and make it wait for you later.”

...Why was he being forced to buy this thing?

“Hear the Universe has been lost for a long time,” Shang Wan’nian continued. “After I accepted its inheritance, I searched for it for a lifetime, only to run into it right before my death. Since this was fate, I had wanted to pass it on to you without hassle, but the timing was off... by Heaven’s will, I must have terrible luck.”

Right as the terribly-unlucky said that, Cheng Qian sensed something flowing from his arm and through all his meridians, ultimately sinking into his inner sanctum between his brows. He saw that the ear-like insignia representing Hear the Universe had been branded into the middle of his inner sanctum at some unknown point in time; it brightened searingly for a short time, then gradually dimmed down.

Shang Wan’nian’s spiritual consciousness appeared in front of Cheng Qian once again. He stared at Hear the Universe with a complicated expression, shaking his head and sighing. “Even though the inheritance isn’t visible, being able to see its surface will allow me to die without regrets.”

“You’re really...”

“Mn, my physical form has already died of natural causes. I expected that I was reaching the end of my life, just not this soon. Tch, this is just adding to your sect’s headache.”

“What is *actually* going on?”

Shang Wan’nian turned around, stared at him quietly for a short time, then opened his mouth, yet no sound came out. He sneered in self-mockery.

“It isn’t that I don’t want to tell you, my little friend. When you fully repair your primordial spirit, the accept the inheritance I have sealed here, you will understand. There is a limitation to the inheritance where no one can speak of Hear the Universe’s secrets.” He paused, smiling bitterly. “Including dead people.”

Cheng Qian could make out no resentment or unwillingness on him. He only appeared to be calm, which made him unable to help but raise a question — everyone was pursuing the attainment of the Dao and ascension to the heavens, so why did this man look to be completely unconcerned?

The other stood before him with a small sense of being apart from the world. “I know all of you hate the Celestial Divination Bureau. They’re despicable, high-and-mighty, and have killed many. Even falling to this extent can’t wipe away their crimes. Yet, for so many years, the fact that cultivators and mortals could live in peace this whole time was in no small part because of those despicable villains. Now that the Bureau and the Nightmare Travelers are defeated, both the demonic and righteous paths of the Central Plains are groups with no leaders, and the catastrophe of ‘millions of unjustly-dead ghosts’ has begun. This is why I must safeguard Han Yuan’s life.” Glancing at Cheng Qian, he then added, “I’m not actually trying to buy off a favor off of your sect.”

Troubled ghosts were created in troubled ages. The Nine Sages were dead, leaving only Han Yuan alive, and Nanjiang’s demons were by no means a lump of scattered sand... but he might truly never be able to return to Fuyao Mountain.

“Still, the timing of the Soul-Devouring Lamp reappearing is too coincidental,” the other continued. “I didn’t expect my time to be up, so I don’t have the time to investigate fully. I’ll just tell you a feeling I have that might not necessarily be correct — someone knows that Tong Ru made a wish on a ghostly stone, and has been continuously fanning the flames in

secret. Apart from the Bureau, the instigator of this foulness, only the four of us should have known about it...”

Cheng Qian’s gaze flashed.

“No, it isn’t Bian Xu. If he really had such a methodical mind, he certainly wouldn’t have drifted through life into looking like such a ghost now.”

Cheng Qian nodded — in an organization as big as the Bureau, who knew who had accidentally leaked that info?

“That was the first thing.” Shang Wan’nian reached out and took back his own consciousness that was wandering about in Cheng Qian’s inner sanctum. “There is another thing I want to tell you. Did you know that you’ve been tampered with?”

“What?” Cheng Qian’s pupils slightly shrank.

“It isn’t on your spirit-jade body, but your soul. Forgive me for being ill-versed in this path, but I can’t see what it’s for. It hasn’t broken out yet? Even though I can’t say that your cultivation base is unmatched in the world, it’s enough to rise to the apex. I’m a bit unsure... who has the remarkable power to place a curse upon you without a trace?”

Fingers trembling, Cheng Qian’s chest seemed to get stuffed with a chunk of ice.

Over all these years, who had mastered this path? Who had had the opportunity to tamper with his soul?

Shang Wan’nian took a measure of his expression. “It seems that you already have an idea.”

Cheng Qian nodded with difficulty, then calmly asked, “Is there any way to resolve it, Estate Lord?”

The other sighed. “I can’t tell what the curse is, so I’m afraid that while I would love to help, I can’t... but, you don’t need to worry too much. If it does genuinely flare up one day, Hear the Universe can resist it for you from where I sealed it.”

“Thank you.”

Shang Wan’nian waved him off. “In the unseen workings of the world, this is fixed destiny. Hear the Universe was meant to land into your hands, there’s no need to thank me — I’ll be off to reincarnate.”

With that, the final string of his spiritual consciousness that had been left behind in the world vanished. It seemed like he had shed some sort of burden, disappearing without regrets.

When Cheng Qian came to, he was in the Residence of Peace, and happened to hear an unfamiliar voice. “...This Senior has had backlash on account of his damaged primordial spirit. I believe that it might stem from frequent use of true essence as of late.”

“...”

His mood had been heavy enough as it was. Where had this braying mule come from?

He opened his eyes to see a cultivator wearing the uniform of White Tiger Estate that was chattering on as he pressed on his pulse. Upon raising his head to see Cheng Qian’s cold gaze, he immediately let go out of fright. “Y-you’re awake, Senior?”

The other expressionless tyrannized him with his eyes.

Yan Zhengming reached over and took the little cultivator aside, blocking Cheng Qian's murderous line of sight for him. From his back, it could be seen that he was angry.

"Don't worry about him." Yan Zhengming clenched his rear molars. "Tell me; what comes after this backlash?"

"N-n-n-nothing comes after," the white-clothed cultivator stammered.

"Senior Cheng's primordial spirit is pure and profound. All he needs to do is rest, and it won't take much time for him to fix it. Don't worry, Sect Leader."

Yan Zhengming's expression relaxed slightly — though it still wasn't anything nice to look at — and then he ordered the guest to be ousted.

"Okay. Many thanks, take care, forgive me for not seeing you out."

Li Yun, who was standing watch at the door, immediately smiled with sincerity. "Over, here, please, come with me... it's alright, don't be scared. Our Sect Leader doesn't bite."

The non-biting Sect Leader Yan watched them depart with an overcast look, after which he slowly turned his head, preparing to settle this post-worry debt.

Cheng Qian wasn't in the mood to pet him along his fur, though. He suddenly leaned back to stare emptily at the bed canopy overhead.

This reaction was not even a little like what Yan Zhengming had imagined would be a guilty conscience. Taken aback, he put his prepared criticism away for the time being, then somewhat powerlessly walked over to his bedside. "What's wrong, now?"

Cheng Qian said nothing, reaching out to pat right beside him in a motion for him to sit down. After that, he closed his eyes, grabbed Yan

Zhengming's hand, and placed it on his own chest.

He was aloof in personality, seldom able to team up with anyone. Tang Zhen was only outsider closest to him.

Yan Zhengming's hand was much warmer, more alive, and more like a living person's than his own.

He took in a deep breath. "Shang Wan'nian reached the end of his natural life, and his primordial spirit went off to be reborn. As I see it, he left in happiness. No one brought harm to him."

That much had already been reported, so Yan Zhengming knew of it. "How do you know that?" he asked, surprised.

"I saw him. He wanted to give an inheritance to me, but my primordial spirit happened to be damaged, so I can't accept it for a minute... it's not any sort of bullshit backlash that that guy just said. Aside from idiots who use forbidden techniques to forcefully raise their cultivation base, who would get backlashed by their own spirit?"

"..." Yan Zhengming pulled his hand away. "You trying to rebel?"

"Don't make noise," Cheng Qian whispered. "My heart hurts, senior."

Yan Zhengming was dumbfounded at that. He had seen a Cheng Qian covered in wounds from fights, seen him, a Cheng Qian that had choked someone into a stumble from one sentence, and a Cheng Qian that had barely managed to muster up the patience to tolerate him, but he had never before seen a Cheng Qian that had furrowed his brows and said that his heart hurt.

In his memories, Cheng Qian seemed to have a heart of stone. Nothing in the world could sway him, nor make him bow his head.

This one bit of incidentally-divulged frailness caused Yan Zhengming to suddenly feel bizarrely excited. He leaned over and tucked a few strands of hair that were beside Cheng Qian's face away. The more he looked at him, the less he knew how to show affection to him, so he couldn't resist bending further down to plant a kiss between his slightly knit brows. "What's wrong?"

Cheng Qian said nothing, looking at the other's face that was so close, and thought with exhaustion, *Will he betray me one day, too?*

Yan Zhengming's heart itched as he was watched by him, yet, out of concern about his health, he dared not touch him, forced to settle himself. "What are you looking at?"

Cheng Qian scrutinized him for a short time, then suddenly smiled breezily. *What am I even thinking about? Whatever he wants, I'll give it to him. If he wants my life, I'll stake my life for him... there's no betrayal to be had.*

Yan Zhengming did not have penetrating vision, and could not see that collection of love pledges in the other's heart. He wet his lips, brazenly salivating while his speech kept with its loathsome, shameless aloofness. "Since your heart hurts, and so does your body, get a good rest today. I... ahem, I can push anything else to the side and just keep you company."

"..."

This Sect Leader was really just a one-of-a-kind species, sometimes.

Cheng Qian cleaned out his heart-filling, tender sentiments. *Ugh. He's so annoying.*

He raised his hand and pushed Yan Zhengming's face away. "No need to trouble yourself more. I have something I need to go out and do. Go to bed

by yourself.”

“Wait, you just got up...”

Cheng Qian’s figure zipped away. He was no longer in the room.

“...”

He couldn’t sort out the Residence of Peace’s owner, so he resolved to sort out its bamboo forest.

Cheng Qian arrived at the guest room where Tang Zhen was staying, only to find that the one in question had left at some unknown point in time. A small box was left behind with a note tucked under its corner: “There is no good in me staying further, so I will take my leave for the time being. What is in the box is a Soul-Leading String. I never had the chance to give it to you all, but I’m afraid that it likely has no use now.”

The String could draw out Han Yuan’s soul for a short period of time, allowing them to have an opportunity to kill that heart demon of many evil deeds without needing to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

The phrasing of the blood oath had specified for the ‘demonic dragon’. If they actually did kill the heart demon, couldn’t the real Han Yuan pile the blame onto it, not be required to travel to Nanjiang, and not have to suffer lashings for five hundred years?

Cheng Qian clenched the note in his fingers, sighing soon afterwards. Had he no doubts in his heart, he might have been ecstatically going off to give this to Yan Zhengming right now.

Now that he *did* have doubts, why would Tang Zhen have brought the String out now, instead of earlier or later?

He had been so hoping that Han Yuan wouldn't go to Nanjiang. Had that been out of good intentions, or had he just been wishing to make the waters even muddier?

And... why had he left in such a hurry?

Affected, he abruptly looked up just in time to see Han Yuan's eye-catching panlong robe flapping up and down atop a low wall outside the room.

"That nosy old guy Shang Wan'nian died," the other explained indifferently. "They don't have the time to pay attention to me right now, so I came out for a stroll by myself. What have you got, there?"

Cheng Qian paused, then told the truth.

Hearing that, Han Yuan carelessly sat down upon the wall, smiling with quite some self-mockery. "Just throw that away, it's useless. Why did those lies come out of our eldest's mouth? It isn't that he doesn't know what a heart demon is... how could there be two souls in one body? This isn't possession."

"Oh? He's become 'our eldest'? Not 'Noble Sect Leader'?"

Han Yuan got caught red-handed.

"He just wants to find an escape route for you," Cheng Qian went on. "If they really do try to kill you, the 'one body, two souls' thing could be used as an excuse."

Propping his arms against the low wall behind him, Han Yuan looked up at the extensive night sky of Fuyao Mountain. A short while later, he said, "There's no need for that, little senior. I've discovered that no one can make excuses for themselves."

Cheng Qian reclined against the courtyard wall of the guest house, imitating his action of looking upwards. The two of them, one sitting and one standing, were on the same side, the same night sky above their heads. They looked like they hadn't been this close in a very long time.

“The three of you went to Yao Valley to rescue me. Second brother openly admitted that he had tricked me into going in. Back then, I was thinking that even though he looked like a prettyboy, he was actually a man of honor.” Han Yuan stretched out his legs, splaying out. Were it not for those imposing panlong robes, he would have vaguely resembled a rascally little beggar.

“Later on, I found out that he was just really smart,” he continued, following which his tone took a turn. “Back when I suffered from soul-painting, I killed you by mistake. If we had switched places, little senior, what would you have done?”

Cheng Qian said nothing, nor did he immerse himself in that scenario. Why talk, when it didn't matter?

“You would have definitely not jumped into the ocean to flee because of soul-painting's wild energy,” Han Yuan soliloquized. “One you broke free of it, you would have definitely gone back to the sect's door to admit your crime. Whether your sect siblings would have blamed you or not would have been their final say. You wouldn't have hidden away.”

The other smiled painfully. “One bag of pine nut candy bought off your high regard of me for these many years?”

Han Yuan started to laugh quiet. As he laughed and laughed, the lines at the corners of his eyes slowly vanished. His face was clearly youthful, yet the look in his eyes showed the wear of life.

“Honestly, I wasn’t afraid of what my siblings would do to do. I knew that they wouldn’t do anything at all, but I was so ashamed that I couldn’t bear it, little senior. Every day, every night, there was too much torment — I could only turn it into hatred and viciousness.”

“You know that we won’t blame you.”

“I acted like I didn’t know that, but I did.”

The more he had known it, the deeper his guilt had grown.

No one was blaming him, but he had just blamed himself more and more.

“I fled for a minute, but I couldn’t flee for a lifetime. I understand that truth now... but it isn’t too late, for me to still be able to see Fuyao Mountain.”

They went silent for a long time.

Cheng Qian suddenly raised his hand, which Han Yuan noticed from his seat on the low wall. Knowingly, he leaned over a little, then clapped him on the palm.

With that crisp sound, all the betrayal and entanglement, the several confrontations, all shortly scattered into nothingness.

“Alright. Since you’re her senior that’s so casually terrified her, why don’t you go find your junior sister and apologize to her?”

“I’ll do it tomorrow,” Han Yuan said, slightly uneasy. “It’s too late tonight. Finding such a grown-up lady in the middle of a night wouldn’t be great... eh, it’s not like I watched her grow up. I’m really not used to it.”

Cheng Qian was deeply affected in that field. Right as he went to say something, a fire in a distant courtyard appeared to explode like fireworks.

The figure of a Red Crane flashed, then landed upon a big tree. In the night scene, Shui Keng shouted out with a slightly pointed voice, “Who are you?!”

His expression turned bad. Touching Shuang Ren lightly against the low wall, he was gone from his original spot the next instant; Han Yuan closely vaulted forwards in chase.

There was an androgynous, pale-faced person in Shui Keng’s courtyard. They were dressed in gaudy clothing that was even weirder than hers.

Han Yuan walked out a sphere of black fog. Crossing his arms across his chest, he looked at the person and frowned. “A yao cultivator?”

When they spotted Han Yuan, they shrank back and retreated a few steps, only for their escape route to be blocked off by someone else.

“Today is neither the first of the month, nor the fifteenth,” Cheng Qian said. “Instead of obediently staying in Yao Valley, you ran over here. Would patience kill you?”

One in front, one behind, the two made it so the yao cultivator had no place to hide. They suddenly let out a shriek of fear, then transformed into a big bird, moving up and down to leap into the cloud cover.

Han Yuan quickly took to the sky, the shadow of a dragon flashing by behind him. Pressuring demonic qi fell into the air and firmly pushed the big bird downwards. He flung out his sleeve, but the eight-trigram symbol from the blood oath flashed on the back of his hand, making him tch. “I’m not allowed to kill,” he said unhappily.

The giant yao collapsed to the ground in human form. Before they could scramble away, a sword was already held against their neck.

The frost on the blade shone blue and white onto their throat.

Cheng Qian, grasping the sword, indifferently pressed them into the ground.
“I wouldn’t think to run, if I were you.”

A pained look showed up on the yao’s face. They didn’t appear to be great at speaking human language. Kneeling on the ground, they looked up at Shui Keng in suffering, then spoke in a weird accent. “You’re the Empress...’s...”

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The Empress's what, the bird yao stammered on and couldn't say, ultimately raising their head to the sky and letting out a cry in anxiety. One clawed hand that had not yet had time to turn into a human one messily drew a circle in midair, barely managing to gesture out what they meant — *You're the Empress's egg.*

Shui Keng believed that being called like that was an utter affront to her youth and beauty, so she put her hands on her hips and stood looking like a teapot. “Yeah, an egg getting this big is like a fishbone stuck in your King's throat, huh? That old man sure has kept me in mind for so many years, to send you to kill me as soon as Fuyao Mountain opened up! Just really sincere... but are all of you in Yao Valley dead to the last? Isn't not sending anyone powerful looking down on me?”

Cheng Qian quietly took a half-step back to avoid her mad raging. In his head, he couldn't help but get a heavy suspicion — who had she learned this standardly-perfect set of naggy scoldings from?

For once in her life, Shui Keng looked to be eloquent. The bird yao was bug-eyed and tongue-tied, rendered mute. They shrank back, looking at her in full sorrow, dusky eyes filling with tears that filled the rims, yet didn't fall.

The overbearing Shui Keng hadn't foreseen this reaction, amazed on the spot. “Hey, all I did was say a few things. What are you crying for?”

Even if the Yao King's mind was going, he would not have sent a crybaby assassin for the job. Seeing that the yao cultivator's claws appeared to be caked in red clay, he used Shuang Ren's sheath to lift up one talon; after peering at it in scrutiny for a short moment, he determined that it had come from the courtyard wall of Fuyao's guest house.

“What were you doing at the guest house?” he asked.

The yao cawed wildly and made gestures. Noticing that no one could understand their bird words, they restlessly went to grab Shui Keng’s skirt.

Han Yuan slapped their talons away. “Speak properly. Don’t use your limbs for it.”

The yao frantically scrambled up from the ground, pointed in a direction, then cautiously took a few steps. Seeing that no one was attacking them this time, they grew bold with reassurance, straightened up, and led the way.

This beast’s heart was uncannily honest; they earnestly played guide without the slightest intention of fleeing. Every few steps, they would even stop and wait for the rest.

The three followed them doubtfully. The yao brought them right up to Tang Zhen’s guest house that he had stayed in prior to leaving. They pointed at the building and said a good deal of bird words, but upon noticing that their language wasn’t understood, they hurriedly scratched on the wall with their talons.

Shui Keng: “...”

She was starting to not look forward to going to Yao Valley and leading the entire race, because she got the sense that these people all appeared to be a bit dim-witted.

Thoughts whirled around in Cheng Qian’s head. “The one that was staying here already left — but you know him?”

The yao nodded on end.

“Could it be that it was because he saw you, that he left in such a hurry?”

They kept nodding.

“Bull.” He grabbed the yao’s neck that was thinner than a typical human’s, then easily pushed them against the low wall, voice cold. “You alone could scare him away? If you really knew something that you shouldn’t, he would have silenced you long ago. How would he have tolerated you flying all about?”

Tang Zhen’s betrayal was like a sharp knife stuck into his heart, his words containing indescribably murderousness.

Both Han Yuan and Shui Keng were startled.

“Wait, what was that about silencing?” Shui Keng asked, doubtful. “Was Senior Tang not staying here?”

The yao was nearly strangled to death by him, hairs puffing out as they desperately struggled for a short moment. In the end, they pitifully drew out a wooden tablet from their neck area. Even their tongue was getting pinched, heaving sounds coming from their throat, and they stuffed the tablet into his hands with a red face.

The power of a charm was vaguely contained with the tablet. His full-body murderous aura not yet gone, he expressionlessly reached out to tear off the tablet, then flung the yao to the side.

He saw a Red Crane carved right onto its surface, the crafting method exquisite. The bird’s body looked sleek and elegant, every iota of it represented... though, it didn’t look to be Shui Keng that was engraved on it, but what ought to be an adult Crane.

On its back, there was a densely-packed charm that overflowed with newness despite its age, flashing with soft fluorescence in the night’s dim.

“What is that?” Han Yuan asked.

“A puppet charm.” Cheng Qian checked it over carefully. “Unused.”

“A puppet charm? How much use could that have?”

These charms could take a fatal hit for their owners one time, able to save their lives at key moments, but it had nothing aggressive about it itself.

Why would Tang Zhen fear such a thing?

In regards to this bird of sparse cultivation base, if they didn’t die the first hit, wouldn’t the second hit do it?

Cheng Qian was confused at first, and then a guess suddenly flashed past his mind. “Was this carved by the one staying inside?” he tentatively asked.

Usually, puppet charms could only be used once, with one extenuating circumstance — given that the charm itself didn’t fade in efficacy, the one that made it would never be able to harm the one that carried it in any way.

The yao nodded like their life depended on it.

Why was Tang Zhen’s charm in the possession of a bird yao that had snuck out of caves behind the mountain in the middle of the night?

What kind of weird addiction did Zhenren Tang have?!

Han Yuan used his toes to nudge the yao. “This thing is yours?”

The lisping yao puffed out their chest, saying with sonorous force, “Empress’s!”

Hearing this, his face suddenly twisted up. “I don’t know what’s going on,” he said to Shui Keng, “but I’m afraid your dad sucks.”

She was vacantly confused, looking at this and then at that.

The yao had always been wanting to get up close to Shui Keng, but was pitifully getting obstructed by Cheng Qian's Shuang Ren. Gesturing, they took a box out from a pocket, with something seen to be wrapped in multiple layers of silk inside. After said layers were peeled back, a fire-red feather that was half a chi long was revealed.

The yao offered the feather up with both hands, cautiously extending their arms to offer it up to Shui Keng. An unspeakable expectation was within those misty eyes.

She was briefly startled, then involuntarily reached out to take it. Whatever was on the feather's surface, it pricked her finger open; a drop of blood flower down, then merged into that blazing red in the blink of an eye.

A pure, drawn-out birdsong resonated through the air, immediately after which a cloud of mist rose up, fell down to the ground, and spread out. A real-looking mirage emerged before all their eyes.

Everyone's lines of sight were first captured by a female yao. She was draped in brocade robes that dragged on the ground, graceful and luxurious from head to toe, and there was not a bit of unsightly yao qi about her face. In spite of the man beside her barely being considered to have an impressive appearance, his limelight was clearly seized by her dazzling glory.

The two were dressed similarly, appearing to be a married couple, but there was a far distance between them, rather giving an overtone of 'mutual respect like ice'.

The bird yao pointed at the two major yao inside of the mirage, gesticulating. "E-Empress..."

Han Yuan looked at the Yao Empress in surprise, then at Shui Keng. He wholly didn't see how their little sister, who made herself up like a country chicken, had ever come from the Empress.

There was another person behind the King and Empress. He appeared to be there as a guest or to attend some ritual, standing like he was a detached party.

Cheng Qian suffered a shock. "Is that our sect grandfather?"

The bird yao glanced at Tong Ru, adopting a reverent posture.

At the frontmost part of the mirage was an old man. Who even knew how long he had lived for, as his wrinkles were heavy enough to trap and crush flies in them. Painting with bright colors, his bone-thin hand gripped several pieces of old tortoiseshell, and he chattered as he knelt on the ground. After closing his eyes for a long while, he opened them like he had heard enough of Heaven's sounds; face full of a waning life, he sighed, then spat out human language thereafter. "Those above proclaim that there will be a calamity in the human world, the Heavenly Yao descending, born in response to the calamity, coming into being while soaked in blood. It will seize the power of the Yao King, causing great chaos."

Hearing this, the Yao King's face became disastrously hard to look at. "Where is the Heavenly Yao?"

The old man opened up his crow's beak. "Birthed from the womb of the Empress."

With that said, the elder did a full-body spasm, fell over onto the ground, and died, actually transforming into a big crow on the spot. He had talked up until his death.

A kick of his legs up into the air meant the end of all his troubles. There was no nonsense to be had, and yet a huge disaster was led to.

The mirage flashed before the eyes. The Yao King was seen to wield a sword, and there was a child beneath it, dead.

The child had the appearance of a five-year-old mortal child, some similarity to the King in their appearance.

This scene warranted no explanation, as everyone understood what they were looking at. The old crow had only said that the Heavenly Demon would come to be, and that it would be born from the Yao Empress; he hadn't said whether it had already been born, or would be later. The King believed that this calamity would be from his own child; having heard that the Heavenly Yao would seize his power, he had decided that he would prefer to believe that they were than that they were no, 'justly' killing his own blood.

The Empress charged in, witnessed this scene, and played with fate by turning hostile towards the King immediately. Unfortunately, she was unable to defeat him, so she left the Valley with injuries, followed only by a palm-sized gray bird right as she left.

The bird yao pointed at the dust-covered, flat-feathered animal that landed upon the Empress's back, shyly introducing himself. "Me."

No one had paid attention to them. Who would be concerned over an ugly little bird?

Afterwards, the mirage revolved once more. The Empress was seen to have changed out of that cumbersome outfit, and was now dressed as just an ordinary woman as she hurriedly brought others up Fuyao Mountain; a young woman with a somewhat slow look, and a man that had suffered heavy injury.

They were both familiar — the woman was Tang Wanqiu, and the man, Tang Zhen.

A huge fang was jabbed down into Tang Zhen's chest. Half of his body was charred black, yet his delicate, refined features could still be made out.

“What piece of the past is this?” Han Yuan wondered.

“Tang Zhen once said that when he was young, he had encountered dangers while traveling with his junior sister, and it was our martial grandfather that granted him rescue,” Cheng Qian answered. “This ought to be that time.”

Right after he said that, the gate of Fuyao was seen in the mirage. A young man that was in the middle of rolling up his pant legs to work on something looked up — upon seeing him, Cheng Qian's breath automatically hitched, his entire being going still.

Master...

Han Muchun resembled what had been on his portrait, yet his mannerisms were already in the fledgling state of that old weasel's later wretchedness, inelegantly carrying a hoe on his shoulder as he saw the Empress from far away. There were no appellations of respect in the man's mouth, so he directly shouted out her name. “Hong Yun! What winds have blown you over here!”

While he spoke, his eyes swept over Tang Zhen and Tang Wanqiu. When the latter met with his gaze, she was startled slightly for a second, then lowered her head in unease, not daring to say anything.

“He was injured by the [Taowu](#) because of me. Where is your Master? Hurry, I need to ask him for help.”

“The Fierce Beast, Taowu?” Han Muchun’s face slightly got serious, quickly after which he threw the hoe that he had just been tilling something in the dirt with into the air, stepped onto it without the slightly fussiness, and flew into the sky. “Follow me.”

Cheng Qian took in Han Muchun greedily, in spite of the thing he was using to fly, his muddied pant legs at uneven heights, and lack of any sort of immortal bearing to be seen on him.

Even so, he couldn’t look enough.

After watching man until he could no longer be seen, Cheng Qian felt a bit of desolation in the breakage of his line of sight.

The bird yao pointed at the courtyard where Tang Zhen had stayed, raising their fist and beating their chest in what seemed like high reverence.

“Your Empress was injured by the Yao King, she left Yao Valley, and then met with Taowu halfway through her journey... ah, I know. In the yaobeast clan, it’s common for the strong to be respected, and to swallow up the weak. Seeing that her cultivation base was damaged, the Fierce Beast wanted to take advantage of the disaster, right?” Han Yuan guessed.

Cheng Qian snapped out of it. “So, Tang Zhen’s alleged injured wasn’t like he said, where he ‘didn’t know his own strength’, but to save someone — the Yao Empress?”

The yao nodded vigorously again. They raised their bird claws again, unskillfully turned them into human hands, then wrangled their two slightly-deformed thumbs into bumping together.

“This, I can understand,” Han Yuan answered lazily from beside him, “They hooked up after recovering from their wounds...”

Cheng Qian shot a glance at him: *Shut up.*

Turning his head to see Shui Keng's dumbstruck look, Han Yuan rolled his eyes, then quietly swallowed his own disrespectful words back down.

At this point, Tang Zhen hadn't yet been caught in the Soul-Devouring Lamp, and did not have that dismaying, deathly aura lingering about him, his eyes as tranquil as spring waters. His cultivation base wasn't yet high, but he was well-learned and had the modesty of a gentleman; even for a human, attraction to him would be inevitable, to say nothing of a yao that had never seen a decent man before.

Fuyao Mountain had a wide area with spare population. Sect Leader Tong Ru would show up and disappear like a ghost, going completely missing for ten days to a half-month. Han Muchun never attended to proper work, accompanying the flowers, birds, fish, and bugs all day long; unless Tang Wanqiu took the initiative to go look for him, he wouldn't show his face. Only the disciple Jiang Peng would occasionally appear to hand over some medicines... since no one would be a disturbance, this made it a great play for a rendezvous.

This all happened quite logically.

The Yao Empress held the grudge of a murdered child, which was basically considered a rupture of relations. Her searching for another lover was not at all strange, but the terrible thing was that there came to be a child between them — exactly the one that was in answer to the calamity the old crow had prophecized.

The Heavenly Yao's birth was inauspicious, with the Empress attracting heavenly tribulations as soon as she got pregnant, a dozen thick pillars of lightning doing all they could to hack down upon her. Even Tong Ru was alarm by this.

Tong Ru had simply watched for a short while, but ended up not being able to take it anymore, moving to protect her. Thankfully, the Heavenly Yao wasn't born, so no credits led to no karma; the attracted heavenly tribulations were not certain in their attempts to put the mother and child to death.

Afterwards, Tang Zhen decided to leave Fuyao Mountain, embarking on a quest to find the legendary Golden Lotus Leaf of Da Xue Mountain for the Empress.

Crossing over the Northern border would lead to grasslands as far as the eye could see, after which one would enter an iceland that never melted through the year; that iceland was also known as the 'Extreme North', with Black Tortoise Hall overseeing it. Even further past the Extreme North, there were thousands of li of uninhabited tall mountains and deep abysses, where divine lakes of the Sea of Beiming were. At the very end floated Da Xue Mountain, with never melted.

The Mountain had no fixed location, and might not be in the same area every time, thus being dubbed a 'Mystic Site'. All sorts of legends told of how amazing it was.

The Da Xue Mystic Site, Valley of the Heart Demon with its Tower of No Regrets, and land-of-the-dead Valley of No Regrets were all known as the three most inaccessible places in the human realm.

It was said that golden lotuses grew at the heart of Da Xue. It only bloomed, and normally did not grow leaves, but at the exact moment when the flower withered and the mountain of snow collapsed and re-constructed, a thumb-length leaf could grow from its roots.

That leaf could reach the source of the Great Dao, and turn all sin into nothing.

Tang Zhen got the wildest idea; he wanted to go find the Golden Lotus Leaf for his child, whose gender he didn't even know yet.

Tong Ru personally saw him down to the foot of Fuyao. "The Leaf has been nothing more than an ancient legend. I rummaged through the nine-story Library Tower yesterday, and never saw it have even one real record of a few scattered words. No one knows if it actually exists... the Da Xue Mystic Site is extremely dangerous. Even I might not be able to escape it. Can you not think more on this?"

The other gave him a very deep bow. "I believe that effort always begets results, Senior."

The still-young Tang Zhen did not have nearly as much exhaustion and anxiety on his face as he later would. He looked abnormally resolute, and after saying farewell to Tong Ru, he floated off.

The mirage came to its end. "H-he n... never came back," the bird yao stammered.

"Junior sis was in that egg for over a hundred years," Han Yuan said, "and I remember that when we first met Tang Zhen, he said that he had been a ghost sucked into the Soul-Devouring Lamp a hundred years ago. This should probably be that time."

Tang Zhen had never returned. Following that, Tang Wanqiu had also said farewell on her own.

The Yao Empress had tried to kill her fetus several times, but ended up unfortunately being unable to. After dodging the heavenly tribulations, she left Fuyao, returned to Yao Valley, and then went up to Immortal Overlook Platform by herself — what came after that, they already knew.

Had she been willing to bring the puppet charm Tang Zhen had left her onto the Platform, maybe she wouldn't have lost her life.

What a shame it was that she had refused.

A hundred years later, everything had changed. A few reckless children from Fuyao Sect had brought the soul of Tong Ru as they charged in, then took the Heavenly Yao away before she could get dyed in blood.

Cheng Qian inwardly sighed, thinking to himself, *All those people are gone. What's the use in keeping objects?*

Later on, Tong Ru had risked a heinous, worldwide offense to step onto the Tower of No Regrets, then fight with the Heavens for his fate? Had that been influence in some way by Tang Zhen's phrase of 'effort always begets results'?

Thinking back on it, partway through the journey to Nanjiang, Tang Zhen, who had been in the middle of going to look for the Ice-hearted Fire, had suddenly stopped. Had he been drawn by the commotion of the Red Crane's transforming yao skeleton?

In that mad dance before the Ten-Party Array, Tang Zhen, someone who had always been all talk, had suddenly gone to bar Xuan Huang's way. Had that been because Xuan Huang's ji had been hacking towards Shui Keng?

But, since he knew the score, after he had already escaped the Soul-Devouring Lamp a hundred years ago, why had he refused to show up for all these years?

He had lodged in Fuyao Estate, and also Fuyao Mountain, before. Shui Keng had even divulged her own past to him without any wariness. Why had he constantly refused to say anything, not changing in expression even after hearing her dissatisfaction?

Why had he left in such a rush after the bird yao had recognized him?

If it hadn't been for the puppet charm he had carved himself years ago that the yao had, would he really have silenced them, just like how Cheng Qian had said?

Sui Keng suddenly turned around and left without another word. For the first time in her life, she felt that she maybe shouldn't have been born.

Cheng Qian smacked the yao that attempted to keep up with her using his scabbard. He shot a look at Han Yuan. "Go and see to her."

"I'm going to track down the Soul-Devouring Lamp." With a raised of his hand, an everlasting lantern beside the guest house's doorway landed in it. "Judging by Tang Zhen's character, he likely didn't make a stop halfway through his journey back then. It should've been either near Da Xue, or straight-up in Da Xue Mystic Site that he got swept into the Soul-Devouring Lamp. I'm going to go take a look... by the way, you told me last time that the reason Jiang Peng entered the ghost path was due to the Celestial Divination Bureau?"

"The Nightmare Travelers' information source..."

"It may not necessarily be true. That other day, the Third Prince said that he had counted up the superpowers of the world, but even the Bureau's Sect Leader's aptitude hadn't been enough in his eyes. I'm getting the overall sense that even though the Bureau wouldn't have been incapable of it, with how Jiang Peng's cultivation base status was, he might not have been in their eyes, either."

Han Yuan raised a brow. "You have suspicions towards Tang Zhen. What for?"

Cheng Qian's face showed a bit of upset, and he said nothing. He dared not be certain that the Soul-Devouring Lamp of today had anything to do with Tang Zhen. Therefore, as long as there was a possibility that Tang Zhen was innocent, it was impossible for him to voice out his own doubts.

Tang Zhen was, after all, his friend.

"Oh, I get it. *The code of brotherhood.*" Han Yuan grinned rather sarcastically. "You plan to leave without word and head out by yourself?"

"Mn."

Han Yuan raised both brows. "You're not telling the eldest?"

"He's really naggy."

"Oh, *is* he?" Han Yuan deliberately dragged out his syllables. "You have the guts to fool around and then leave without a goodbye?"

Cheng Qian's face went stiff. He said nothing.

"You *would* be the type, little senior," Han Yuan mocked.

Cheng Qian kept silent for a long time, then powerlessly conceded. "...I don't have the guts."

Han Yuan hadn't expected that he would so bluntly admit it. After being mute for a minute, he couldn't resist laughing. "I'll go check on Shui Keng. You hurry on to the Sect Leader's room to grovel at him."

Cheng Qian returned to the Residence of Peace with a heavy load on his mind. He noticed that the bamboo forest behind the courtyard had completely transformed into a bald patch.

Instead of thinking to demand justice for the bamboo sea, he felt a bit of gratitude, hoping that Yan Zhengming's anger would be used up and that he could be milder for a minute.

Right as he moseyed on in, and before he could come up with proper wording, Yan Zhengming had already noticed that something was wrong from his slightly evasive eyes. "What are you going to do?" he asked in suspicion.

Cheng Qian hesitated for a while, then gave a brief explanation. "I plan to go to Da Xue Mountain."

It was unknown what emotions Yan Zhengming was having, as he didn't say anything for a long time.

Cheng Qian's heart thudded. *Damn. That razed bamboo forest had no effect.*

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Chapter 99

Cheng Qian cautiously observed Yan Zhengming's expression. "I know what's right and wrong in this. I won't go deep into the Mystic Site, and I won't touch anything inside it. I just want to go look for the trail the Soul-Devouring Lamp left—"

"Even Tong Ru said that he might not have been able to escape intact going into that place," Yan Zhengming cut him off. "You feel yourself to be more powerful than him now, as you're practically able to ascend, yes?"

"..."

"There's that Tang Zhen, too. He was human when he left, then changed into a ghost after a hundred years. You think that you're more cautious than him, more learned than him, right?"

Cheng Qian's head hurt. "Senior, just say it. Don't be so obtuse."

"Oh, okay." Yan Zhengming stopped being obtuse, and turned decisive. "That's impossible."

Cheng Qian did not speak out against him, merely shutting up and waiting.

Millions of resentful souls sacrificed for spiritual stones — at the end of it all, that had been because of Tong Ru.

Later on, Jiang Peng, secretly floating between life and death for years as he secretly refined the Soul-Devouring Lamp, had been a titled Fuyao disciple.

After establishing the blood oath where he would have to catch the Soul-Devouring Lamp, the demonic dragon Han Yuan, set to guard Nanjiang for like, was also a Fuyao disciple.

For three generations, they had been unable to shake off their relationship with it. They couldn't stay out of this on account of feelings and logic.

There was no need for him to repeat these events like a rolling wheel. Yan Zhengming knew them by heart.

As expected, a short while later, Yan Zhengming abruptly stood up, then paced around the room like a donkey pulling a grindstone. "Had I known earlier that this sect would be such a bother, I would have rather died than take Master's Sect Leader Seal from you back then," he grumbled.

Cheng Qian knew that his thoughts had already turned, so he allowed him to be exasperated without a single comment.

Seeing that no one was answering his trick, the other went purposefully looking to start something. "Are you mute? Speak!"

"I... uh." Cheng Qian thought for a bit. "I can warm your bed for you tonight?"

Yang Zhengming flew into a rage. "I'm trying to talk to you about serious business! What trash are you thinking about in your head?! Scandalous!"

"..."

Looking at his reaction, Cheng Qian felt like a pervert that had just harassed a good woman. He rubbed his nose with quite some awkwardness.

"Go, go, go! Get out, now!"

Cheng Qian silently headed out.

"Stop!" Yan Zhengming was extremely angered by his lack of propriety. Vexed, he wavered between his dignity and material benefits for a long

time, then decided to just be real by being shameless. “Who told you to get out?”

“...”

Despite him having to rely on his senior for this, he felt that this trashbag was really too hard to attend to.

“It *isn't* impossible, but I want to go with you.” Yan Zhengming coughed lightly, getting a bit serious. “In a few days, Han Yuan will go down South with that White Tiger Estate group. Shui Keng, Li Yun... and that cheap disciple of yours will stay behind to keep watch on things.”

“That won’t do,” Cheng Qian answered. “The Wish-Granting Stone is on Fuyao Mountain. If you actually do leave, our second and the rest might not be able to guard it.”

Yan Zhengming furrowed his brows as he mumbled to himself for a short moment. “Then we’ll seal the mountain back up and have them represent the sect as they go out for that demon-slaying trip. That’ll be the same as us going ourselves.”

Cheng Qian was worried about the unknown issue remaining on his soul, which he hadn’t yet dared to speak with Yan Zhengming about for right now. He wanted to act alone, having considered this aspect — the consequences created by Han Yuan’s soul-painting a hundred years ago were really too tragic. He had been bitten by a snake once, and now feared ropes, having a particular aversion to these curse techniques.

After thinking about it, he made a roundabout excuse. “This needs to be talked about at length. The blood oath was started by Shang Wan’nian, and now he’s dead, while no one knows what the name of the new Estate Lord will be. Even though the oath is in their hands, those disciples might not be able to control Han Yuan, while Bian Xu bears anger; beyond that, looking

as his appearance, his cultivation base as clearly stagnated. He probably doesn't have many years left. Nowadays, there's not a single person with speaking power in the Central Plains; if you seal up the mountain to go up North with me, then..."

Yan Zhengming silently stared at him.

"Then, even if I have no objections, others might not be willing for it," he finished calmly.

"Cheng Qian." Yan Zhengming sneered. "Don't think that I don't know what's in your heart beneath those clothes and that human skin."

"..."

His nicely-worded patience finally came to an end with a frown. "I'm just going on a trip. Are you planning on sticking to me all my life?"

"Yes," the other answered, "I just want to put you on house arrest here for all time, so what else are you thinking of saying? 'Even prisoners will have times they can go outside', right? Right! Prisoners can do that, but not you — got it? That's what I think! Do you have regrets, now?"

Cheng Qian had quarreled from childhood to adulthood with him, and completely grasped the guy's special characteristic of being entirely unreasonable and annoying bothersome. He was a bit annoyed, but right when he wanted to open his mouth and retort, he suddenly noticed that Yan Zhengming's lips were trembling slightly and nearly bloodless. Contained inside his irritable look appeared to be deeply-buried pain, likely age-old scars that were hidden in his bottommost depths by his tough veneer.

Words arrived at the edges of Cheng Qian's lips, yet he suddenly couldn't speak them out.

He had to clench his hand that had Hear the Universe hidden, thinking to himself, *Can I really trust in this piece of junk?*

He was quiet for too long, nearly terrifying Yan Zhengming a little.

Those words of his had been blurted out without passing through his brain first. He himself couldn't distinguish between which of them had been out of truth or out of anger, but that didn't inhibit him from already regretting them. Right now, his mind was a momentary blank expanse, unable to think up a way to retrieve what he said for the life of him. "I..."

"Okay," Cheng Qian suddenly said. "You really want to come with, so let's go together. I'm just afraid that we'll need to leave quickly, and return just as fast."

Yan Zhengming watched him dumbly, not yet returning to his senses.

Cheng Qian's anger had thoroughly leaked out. He sighed, then beckoned towards the other. "Alright, don't stare blankly. Come over here."

Sect Leader Yan, who had just been so enraged that he was nearly ready to bite someone, obediently followed him into the room.

The day after, Yan Zhengming happily declared his own 'careless' decision, but Li Yun was suffering.

He hadn't expected that with a mere shut and open of his eyes, so many things would have happened in great numbers. He was narrowly bowled over from these stories that could be spread out together and made into a picture book.

He looked at their Sect Leader expressionlessly. "So...?"

“You’ll take Nian Dada and Shui Keng to look after Han Yuan on their trip for me. We will return to group up with you all in ten days to half a month, at the most.”

Li Yun sneered. “Right. I’ll bring the disciple, watch the kid, cow a junior brother that’s so savage I’m no match for him at all, and also have to uphold the sect’s reputation, stepping one interfering foot into the business of ‘eliminating demons and defending the Dao’... Sect Leader, do you think I have three heads and six arms?”

“Well, you’ve entered the Dao with Ninth Chain, are cunning in mind, and always pretty competent. I believed that none of that will be an issue for you.”

How kind of him to not be disdainful of his low cultivation base and lack of work ethic! Li Yun wanted to smash that fake praise right onto Yan Zhengming’s face. “Piss off!” he roared in rage. “Whoever wants to do that can do it, but I won’t! You might as well expel me from the sect!”

Li Yun, who lived life year-round in a hell of torment, howled in protest often. Yan Zhengming had long grown accustomed to this, so he simply ignored him, then turned to Shui Keng. She appeared to have not yet mentally recovered from what happened last night, looking wilted and unenergetic.

“Junior sister, come with me,” he said.

Ever since he had started hanging around the Residence of Peace, this was the first time he had taken it upon himself to go out its door. He led her straight to the Hall of Ignorance.

The worn-out, thatched building where Zhenren Muchun had lived was the same as it always was. Daolings would come to clean it every day, its

courtyard very tidy. Shui Keng gave him a confused look, not knowing what the meaning of this was.

He pointed at the busted, three-legged wooden table. “Carved under that table are the rules for our Fuyao Sect. When your brothers entered the sect, each of us had to copy them over forty-nine times. As for whether or not these sect rules need to be complied with is something you can figure out for yourself, like that rule about not about not entering the caves and whatnot on the first and fifteenth of the month are for small children that have just entered. You can just copy them twice, then not worry about it any more.”

Upon saying this, he paused a bit, then cleared his throat with a grave expression. “Admitted disciples should have been brought by Master into the Hall of Ignorance and personally bestowed a precept; even though you’ve been admitted for a hundred years, you have never gone through this procedure. Now that Master is gone, I, as your senior, will have no choice but to overstep my bounds...”

Her eyes widened.

Yan Zhengming lowered his eyes to look at her. “You are optimistic by nature, and have no lack of propriety. You don’t overthink about anything, nor do you act too excessively. This is good. If you can put a bit more effort in and have less fanciful daydreams, your cultivation base will improve by a layer.”

She had heard that when Master gave precepts, he would first list one’s shortcomings before granting them, and hadn’t expected that her senior would give her such a high evaluation. She felt somewhat powerless.

“I’ll task you with passing a message along to your fourth brother: ‘Fuyao has walked the path of humanity since time immemorial, and doesn’t need to listen to Heaven’s will.’ Naturally, there is a high need to discuss origin.

You should have been born in a bath of blood, but you weren't. You should have arrived in response to catastrophe, but you've grown to this size in peace. Tong Ru wholeheartedly wanted to change the sect's fate, and Master's fate. Looking at things now, he appears to have entirely failed, only unintentionally planting aid for you that got you to where you are now. As is evident, some things do not need to be overly held on to — today, I give you the precept of 'Nature'. I hope that in the future, regardless of whether you're a high power that can make the yao bow their heads, or just a minor disciple of the sect that amounts to nothing, you will always be candid about everything you are, not holding yourself up too high, nor making yourself suffer. There are three thousand branches to the Great Dao. If you have a broad enough understanding, there will come a day that your own unique route will reach its destination. Got that remembered?"

He was rarely this serious, giving Shui Keng a momentary illusion. She felt that he was akin to an undecaying mountain ridge that always inconspicuously supported from the depths of Fuyao — typically hidden behind mountain-coating glowers and weeds or snow and mud, but in exceedingly rare times, showing calmness and staunchness of a blade unhurried.

She had been raised by her senior brothers; in comparison to her biological father, who was ambiguous in attitude and refusing to acknowledge her, their Sect Leader was more like her father.

Her nose suddenly ached, and she gave a muffled hum. "Okay. Thank you, senior," she said, muffled.

Unfortunately, before she could be properly moved, she saw Yan Zhengming let out a long sigh. "I'm finally done dealing with you," he said, both disdainful and brisk. "I've always felt you to resemble a wild disciple without undergoing this process, so now you should be domesticated... in a while, you'll go clean up the Hall of Ignorance. I won't be here in a few

days — you'll accompany Li Yun in copying the sect rules, so flop about and cause trouble less."

"..."

Alright, then. Their eldest's goodness would forever be just a flickering shadow, which would then flow far, far away.

Like so, Yan Zhengming sealed Fuyao Mountain, which had only reappeared in the human world for a few days, back up. Everyone prepared to go their separate ways once again.

Calmly, Han Yuan watched the mountain gradually disappear into the Mystic Site, packing as much of the scenery as he could into his mind, because he knew that he would never be coming back.

"Go on," Yan Zhengming said to them. "See you in Shuzhong in a month."

Cheng Qian and him flew swiftly on their swords the whole way, not stopping for one second en route. They reached the Extreme North in one day and one night.

Superpowers crossing the border nudged the warning bell hanging above Black Tortoise Hall. The disciples that were guarding the gates that day went out to investigate, but found no one — there was only a faint and narrow trail of frost to be seen in the sky, which instantly melted in midair.

Past the Hall and heading North, there was a large frontier of ice fields with no human habitation. The borderless white made the Heavens and the Earth become one, unreasonably desolate.

They flew over the Extreme North's ice fields and great abysses for three full days. The air was getting colder and colder, giving Cheng Qian the illusion that he had returned to the ice pool in Mingming Valley. Still, that

pool at just been one nook, simply incomparable to the chill of the great, boundless ice fields, as well as their indiscriminate callousness towards all living things. It was like all hopes and lives would be ended here.

After the three days, the ice plane came to an end. An expansive sea abruptly rushed into view — they had finally reached the Sea of Beiming.

Yan Zhengming shook the Stone Seed out of his sleeve. It fell into the stagnant ocean water, then transformed into a ship that towered like a mountain, which sailed by itself with no captain. The lotus brocade and censer-included carved bed in the hold looked familiar, having the same specifications as a land of luxury would.

Cheng Qian went around and admired the ship both inside and out, not knowing what to say to him.

“What are you looking for?” Yan Zhengming asked.

“A songgirl,” Cheng Qian teased with a straight face. “I get the overall feeling that in the very next moment, I’ll be able to hear the cries of warblers, singing out something that you said... what did you call it, again?”

“Shove off. This damned place is going to freeze me to death,” Sect Leader Yan complained without any sort of sincerity, all the while he was wearing soft, embroidered robes and waving a folding fan. “This is all because you went looking for trouble!”

“...”

Sect Leader Yan sprawled out on his back on one side of the soft bed, then arrogantly pointed his chin in command. “Why are you still not coming over here and massaging my legs?!”

Used to ignoring his senseless provocations, Cheng Qian leaned against a mast and gazed out at the sea.

It was clearly straight noon right now, yet there was not a glint of light on its surface. It resembled pitch ink, more indescribably black than even the deepest mountain abysses. The sky was on-and-off dark, too. Not one fish was seen in the water, the ocean calm and level. It seemed like a dead zone.

Lined up against this place, the East Sea with its numerous reefs and turbulent waves was practically a babbling brook.

No one knew how deep the Sea of Beiming went. When he looked down into the ocean, he couldn't resist getting that feeling he had had when young and sticking out his head to look into the Valley of the Heart Demon — he clearly knew the dangers inside it, yet he wanted to probe all the way through it all the more.

“Who is worthy of being crowned with the title of Beiming? All those short-sighted mortals are nothing short of preposterously self-important.”

He had suddenly recalled Tong Ru's words. When first hearing them, he had believed his martial grandfather to be bitter and self-deprecating; it was not until this moment that he was truly convinced of them.

As genuine night descended, the far and vast sound of wind began to sweep past the ocean's surface, its wailing like a myriad of phantoms circling about when it passed. The ship that the Stone Seed turned into was a hundred zhang tall, yet when it traversed over this, it looked like a skiff.

Without realizing it, Cheng Qian remained calmly standing on the side of the ship for one whole day and night, having entered meditation without the slightest bit of warning. It was strange to say, but while he had been born narrow-minded, he was particularly bound to the wide sea and empty sky.

Every time he meditated, if he wasn't up in the sky, he was by the sea; this practicing process itself was presumably making up for his lack.

Outside of the East Sea was Beiming. What was outside of Beiming, then?

Human lives did not last as long as the world did. What was the world before it had begun, and what would it be after it decayed?

With their limited bodies, they explored the unlimited realms, entering this extremely narrow road and walking on this path that was foreordained for martyrdom. Was that merely for the sake of mortals' vain wishes to ascend, thus being all-powerful?

At this moment, Hear the Universe, from where Shang Wan'nian had sealed it in his inner sanctum, subtly resonated with the Sea of Beiming, as if they were faraway echoes passed down from ancient times. In his daze, he heard the bells toll again; Hear the Universe suddenly shone lustrously with brilliant colors, but unfortunately, the force Shang Wan'nian maintained beside his primordial spirit slightly blocked it, and it receded again.

It was unknown how long had passed before he woke up. Upon opening his eyes, he noticed that Yan Zhengming was leaning against the cabin with misty all around him, keeping watch by his saw.

As soon as he saw him, Cheng Qian felt like he had fallen from the heavens to land in the mortal realm, the fondness automatically born in his heart making him smile a bit. "How long has it been?" he asked.

Yan Zhengming raised a hand to wipe the dew off his face for him. "Three days. I'm bored to death."

"Three days?" Cheng Qian was taken aback, frowning as he took a look around their surroundings. "We don't even have a map. How are we going to find the Da Xue Mystic Site?"

“Finding a map would be pointless. You wouldn’t be able to understand a sea map, anyways. The Stone Seed doesn’t move with the water’s flow, it’s drawn by areas of dense, pure qi. We’ll roam around and look. Isn’t the rendezvous with them in a month? It won’t take more than a few days to think of something.” Yan Zhengming came in close as he spoke, then languidly reached out and help Cheng Qian by the waist, clinging close. “It’s really quiet here. It feels like we’re the only two left in the whole world.”

Cheng Qian thought meticulously about that scenario, then suddenly trembled in fear. “What? And be the only one left for you to torment? I’d better hurry and off myself.”

Yan Zhengming had a seldom-seen tranquility today. Not lowering himself to his level of being a super wet blanket, he held him even tighter. “When we were in the Valley of the Heart Demon, I thought about this more than once. If we were the last two left in the world, that would be great.”

While he said that, he slightly shut his eyes, feeling that in this very moment, his heart was finally filled up full.

There had always been gaps left in it before this. At times, turmoil had been able to knock a string of fanciful images out; even on Fuyao Mountain, he would occasionally wake up with a start from some irrelevant nightmares.

One day, he had even dreamed that Fuyao was finally back to being the head of ten biggest sects, its limelight growing, and yet there were countless, beautiful female cultivators coming to the mountain in quick succession, seeking Cheng Qian out to become dual cultivation partners with him. He had then woken up out of supreme anger, and only upon seeing Cheng Qian’s peacefully sleeping face had he realized that that had only been a difficult feeling emitted from the bottom of his heart.

Seeing that Cheng Qian's earlobe was close to him, he couldn't resist lightly licking it, then opening his mouth to suck on it, rubbing it with his canines.

The other jolted and elbowed him, a thin layer of red quickly rising up from his neck to his ears. "What are you doing? Do you think this is Fuyao?" he scolded.

Yan Zhengming let him go, laughing lowly. "Others in the past have told me that Sword Spirit Realm is nothing but blades. I didn't believe them, but now I understand why it's come to be that each step has one heart demon... humans are never satisfied. Before, I thought that even if it was beside the Yellow Springs or the mouth of the river of forgetfulness, it would be great if I could see you again. After we met again after such a long separation, I then thought that if your heart was like my heart, everything would be fine, even if I never spoke it out for my entire life... now, I'm suddenly not satisfied enough again. Before the name 'Cheng Qian', I forever want to add the word 'my'."

Despite his heart being warmed by him, Cheng Qian sincerely teased him. "Your own feelings wavering all over the place has to do with your cultivation base not being enough. Don't blame the Sword Spirit Realm."

"..."

After being silent for a minute, Yan Zhengming stared at him gravely. "Did you *actually* not hear me pour out my heart to you?"

The other started laughing immediately, which humiliated him into anger, to the point that he struck a pose like he was going to go back into the cabin and sulk. Cheng Qian quickly grabbed his hand while smiling. "Hey, senior, don't get mad. I wasn't..."

His voice abruptly cut off as his pupils slightly contracted. All of a sudden, he felt the boat beneath their feet picking up speed — in the next instant, he pulled Yan Zhengming to his side, reached out, and grabbed the mast, the entire Stone Seed-turned-ship bobbing straight up and down at the same time.

He saw that the vast, edgeless Sea of Beiming appeared to split apart down the middle out of nowhere, tearing the whole world into two different parts, creating a huge ‘waterfall’ that was tens of thousands of chi deep...

And, even with such a horrifying scene, there was not a bit of the sound of water to be heard.

There was no time for him to think carefully about this, as the big ship had crossed right over the gap, and flown outwards.

—

Chapter 100

The still ocean water was split into two without any prior warning, an infinitely deep abyss nearly a hundred zhang wide made in the middle. The huge ship plunged headfirst into the depths, emitting a rumbling sound in midair like it was going to fall apart, sounding like someone's teeth were rattling.

Kneading his ears, Yan Zhengming waved his hand to retract the Stone Seed into his sleeve. The two each mounted their swords, then stopped perilously above the crevasse.

There was no wind, nor waves. The water bobbed right up and right down, but its rate of flow was so slow, it was unnatural, simultaneously supporting a frigid seawater wall, its lifeless ripples the spitting image of paint.

The two midair swords shivered involuntarily, as if intending to throw off their masters and flee solo at any time.

Cheng Qian gathered true essence into his eyes, then looked down. The gap's end could not be seen.

“Senior, you said that your lousy boat would find the Site by itself according to its pure qi, yet it ended up finding a ditch?” he had to mock, finding something funny in this pain.

Yan Zhengming glared at him. “How would I know about this? Furthermore, why the hell would I come to this hellscape for no good reason? Don't put all the blame—“

“I'm all to blame, it's all me, okay?” Cheng Qian hurried to cut him off. “Now, what? We're leaving, right?”

“What do you think? Are you going to be stuck in this ditch for the new year?” Yan Zhengming slightly adjusted his wooden sword’s height, then grabbed Cheng Qian’s wrist in warning. “Don’t let go of my hand.”

The two were utterly cautious as they flew forth on their swords, trying to get some distance from the pit before they released the Stone Seed again, but something bizarre happened — the abyss seemed to be alive.

It resembled a unmeasurably deep mouth with a black hole for an open throat as it chased after them relentlessly. They flew up higher, only for the water and the chasm below them to also swell in suit. They flew forwards, and the chasm became the moon in the sky; where the people went, the ravine also went.

Time slightly elongated, fuzziness appearing before the eyes.

If this goes on, our true essence will get drained, and we won’t be able to escape this place, Cheng Qian thought to himself.

He turned his head to see that one side of the abyssal seawater wall was extremely oppressive, looking like it was soon about to collapse and crush them underneath it.

A feeling of suffocation steeply arose in his chest due to the oppression. Shuang Ren suddenly shrieked; snow-bright swordlight flashed as it was quickly irrigated with Tide Swordplay swordwill. The retaliating Swordplay fearlessly swirled up the tsunami-like Beiming water, and the originally static surface of the sea started blustering up into a huge, pitch-dark tide, ice fragments tiering up on its fringes, which produced eye-piercing white in the black water as it pelted down upon the stifling sea wall.

There was a crash, the massive sound seeming to deafen all of the Sea of Beiming. A chill went through his heart — there was something under the sea wall!

Thus, without counting them, he raised huge waves in quick succession, turned them into tower after tower of soaring icebergs, and continuously rammed them into the wall.

Yan Zhengming automatically blinked as he felt the water vapor in the air solidify into bits of ice, then brush past him like little knives.

He stroked the back of his neck, sensing that Cheng Qian was pretty enormously tolerant of him, actually.

Following several such direct collisions, the entire outer surface of the wall broke apart. The thin water curtain appeared to get pulled by some unknown power, shifting it to the sides to reveal a gigantic natural iceberg in its middle.

It was flat, as if shaved, and stretched on for a thousand li, not a hint of a crack anywhere on it. It was unclear what it encased, but it refused to come up to the surface, hiding half-sunken, half-floating in the black water.

Was this the Da Xue Mystic Site?

Could it be that the legendary Site of no fixed location was actually under the Sea of Beiming?

Yan Zhengming pressed on Cheng Qian's sword-wielding hand. "You've sure come across a huge dead rat, my blind cat," he murmured.

They were both beyond bewildered. The next moment, countless delicate swords from the primordial spirit flew out of Yan Zhengming's sleeves like raindrops, then descended upon the icy layers of unknown depths. The sharp sword tips struck against the thick ice, the chaotic noise of metal and stone ringing out; the majority of the swords bounced back into the air, turned into pure qi, then went back into Yan Zhengming's inner sanctum, but a few of them sunk into the ice.

The spirit swords contained thousands of strands of his spiritual consciousness, and as soon as any of them vanished, he would immediately detect it. “Here,” he said, tugging at Cheng Qian.

Following the sword copies, the two quickly found the area where the blades had stuck in — beneath the inconsistent illumination of the black sea, there was a small cave less than one human tall in the massive ice chunk.

Cheng Qian did not shun the cold, reaching out to explore the inside of a smooth notch in the cave. Icicle bits immediately billowed and pointed at his palm, looking like a group of tiny blades standing erect on the ice’s surface.

“Someone made this,” he said. “See? There’s still residual sword qi in the gap... ah?”

His hand abruptly paused. A thin current of bloody qi flew out from within the icicles, passed through his finger, then recklessly rammed into his body-protecting true essence. It was only remnant qi, already quite weak, and yet it still had the viciousness to want to fight him.

“A demonic cultivator?” He took back his hand in slight surprise.

Could it be Tang Zhen?

With one glance at him, Yan Zhengming knew what he was thinking. “It isn’t Tang Zhen. This sword qi is old, yet still so violent; it’s plain to see that the one that made this cave had to have been a powerful demonic cultivator, whose base was definitely no lesser than yours. Tang Zhen wouldn’t have been off the mountain for a long enough time, and if he had a base like this, he would not have ended up like that over a merely injury from a fierce beast.”

Once he brought that up, a thought flashed through Cheng Qian's mind.

The Yao Empress had been heavily injured by the Yao King back then; adding that onto her having been an auspicious bird, she and the beast had been innately at odds, so her nearly getting chewed by it had been within reason. Cultivators with some backing power that were out of the sect, however, should have always had common goods for subduing yao, warding off evil, and healing on them; even the softest of them, Li Yun, would not have suffering any losses coming across that beast, to say nothing of the fact that Tang Wanqiu had been around.

Unless.... at the time, Tang Zhen's cultivation base had been far inferior to Li Yun's, to the extent that the siblings hadn't even had primordial spirits.

"You want to go in and see?" Yan Zhengming asked.

Cheng Qian nodded, turning sideways to enter the human-made ice cave.

He had wanted to repeat his move from the Ten-Party Array; a cluster of fire jumped out with a flick of his fingers for illuminate, but this trick didn't work at all in the ice cave. After the flame was ignited, it rapidly died and went out, and the same went for repeated tries. Apparently, the Site did not tolerate any light.

Yan Zhengming placed his hand on his, then drew a night pearl out of his Bag of Holding like a rich guy. "Something's off with this place. Save your strength."

The artificially-made passage was extraordinarily narrow and long, various chopping marks of sabres and axes vaguely able to be seen. Clearly, it had not been a lone person that had come here. The people that had opened the cave were either a team of shorties, or they just didn't make the tunnel very high in order to conserve energy; the two of them had to bow their heads to walk through it, the pressure of which made one very irritable.

Yan Zhengming could feel the hair on top of his getting messed up by the ice. “When we get out of here, you’re going to have to comb out my hair again,” he said in displeasure.

Cheng Qian felt exasperated. “As you wish. I promise that I’ll brush along your fur.”

They went along with bowed heads and backs arched like cats’ for a full fifteen minutes, and only then did the narrow passage come to its end. Even so, the breaths suspended in their chests did not have time to get breathed out.

This was the entry of the real Da Xue Mystic Site; a wide clearing suddenly opened up before them, and they discovered that there was something very peculiar with this entirely different world.

The night pearl Yan Zhengming held started flashing on and off like it was possessed, then eventually put itself out.

There not being any light shouldn’t have been important, as blinded primordial spirit cultivators would still have spiritual consciousness, which could easily sweep out for a few li around. However, Yan Zhengming quickly found out that it had become oddly difficult to place his consciousness outside in this place. He blinked forcefully, the ice particles congealed upon his lashes falling straight down, and in that split second, he felt the piercing cold.

With his cultivation base, cold and heat had long been unable to encroach upon him, and a sword cultivator’s body was a bit sturdier than other cultivators’, as well. His typical complaints about temperature were purely him starting shit.

Yet, the chill here was different, causing him to have a split second of misperception, as if he had suddenly lost his cultivation base and turned

into a powerless mortal once more.

Cheng Qian's hand was too cold, while Yan Zhengming's skin was already too frozen to feel anything. He could barely even sense Cheng Qian's existence. Spiritual consciousness met with difficulty in sweeping his surroundings, he was barely able to clearly 'see' the space three chi below his feet, and no matter the distance, his senses seemed to be getting frozen still by the ice.

Just recently, he had still been whining about that long corridor of ice being too narrow to lift his head up in, but now, he felt that this place was way too big. For a short time, he got the illusion that he was standing on the very edge of the world, neither living nor dead, accompanied only by this unmatched loneliness and cold, dithering here all by himself...

All of a sudden, the back of his hand got pinched hard. "Don't let your mind wander here," Cheng Qian whispered.

Jolting, Yan Zhengming took a few intense gasps. The icy air went straight into his lungs. It was like he had just come back alive from a deathland.

Following that, he discovered another awfully terrible thing — the very moment he got distracted, a wisp of cold qi had penetrated his inner sanctum, freezing it entirely. Those pieces of true essence, ever-surging and resembling sharp swords, were deathly still from the cold. Had it not been for Cheng Qian's interruption, his primordial spirit would have almost unconsciously left his body.

"It's too cold," Yan Zhengming whispered, returning to his senses. "Was the ice pool in Mingming Valley this cold?"

Cheng Qian was obviously more adapted to this than he was. As he led Yan Zhengming in a cautious walk forward, he used deliberately heavy footsteps

to break the silence here. “Mn. A different thing, but the same result. Keep talking to me, or it’ll be easy to qi deviate.”

“How was it like, in your years there?” Yan Zhengming chased after.

“The pool was very cold. When cold gets to a certain extent, one will hallucinate inside it, making it especially easy for the primordial spirit and physical form to separate,” the other replied, completely placid. My soul had just entered Spirit Concentration Realm when it entered the Spirit-Collection Jade, and my primordial spirit was cultivated within it, so it intangibly regarded the jade as its body. Since it wasn’t my natural one, though, there was always some area that was incompatible with my soul. I had to use the cold of the ice pool to break apart, then wear in my corporeal body and primordial spirit, again and again... to use an analogy, it was like woodworking. Material needs to be continuously cut and worn down before things can join together snugly.”

Others said that he was wooden, and he himself actually saw himself as a chunk of wood that could be scoured and whittled away as seen fit — how painful it had to have been, for his primordial spirit and the Jade to grind each other down. Yan Zhengming felt like his heart was being torn apart after thinking about this for but a moment, grasping the other’s ice-cold hand and saying nothing.

Cheng Qian kept going without a care. “That’s why I’m guessing that Tang Zhen had to have been here before, else he wouldn’t have thought of using ice pools to forge... what is this?”

As he was talking, Shuang Ren’s tip suddenly bumped into something, making a light *ding*.

“Watch out. Don’t be reckless with where you step,” Yan Zhengming said, after which he brought out another night pearl. The objects were big and round-looking, each and every one of them with enough value to buy a

whole city, yet he didn't hesitate to scoop them out by the handful like candied beans.

The pearl was like a messed-up candle flame being blown by wind. The instant it came out of the Bag of Hoarding, it flickered like its life was at stake, then rapidly began to dim. But, it managed to illuminate the ground at their feet, at the very least.

By the faint light, Cheng Qian saw that what he had just run into was a human skeleton, which neither of them had swept over with their spiritual consciousness. It was too similar to an ice sculpture, able to completely blend in with the ice walls surrounding it, as if it had been growing there for all time.

Right when he had crouched down and reached out to touch it, his hand got smacked away by Yan Zhengming, who then pasted a handkerchief onto him.

“...”

He reluctantly took it, thinking that there had to be hundreds or even thousands of handkerchiefs pre-prepared in this guy's bag, for them to be able to hold up against his ruination.

“Are they actual human bones?” Yan Zhengming asked.

“They should be.” An ominous premonition suddenly rising within him, Cheng Qian's heart started jumping wildly for no real reason. He tried to calm himself. “It's been too long. They're frozen solid.”

Yan Zhengming came in close to size it up. Noticing that there was a short knife at the skeleton's side, he had Cheng Qian break it off from the big, icy lump, then shift away the frost on its handle. There was a familiar insignia engraved on it.

“A Nightmare Traveler,” Cheng Qian provided. “I saw a lot of these symbols when I went to Zhaoyang.”

Even further in, several similar skeletons laid all around on their backs. No fatal wounds were visible on their bones, and the way there were laid out at crooked, random angles made them look like a bunch of bamboo poles that had gotten bowled over by heavy wind.

Very odd.

The slightly taut string in Cheng Qian’s heart pulled to its tightest.

“Strange,” Yan Zhengming whispered. “Why would these demonic cultivators not stay nicely in Nanjiang, but run all the way here to meet their fates?”

“Don’t talk. Be cautious.”

As soon as he said that last word, a sudden scream came from the previously dark and deathly silent depths of the Site, like a sharp knife sticking straight into one’s eardrums. He only sensed a buzzing in both of his ears, as if someone had punched him hard on the temple, and like his three hun and seven po were quickly going to be shaken loose.

The world spun for a spell. He was nearly unable to stand. Before he could react properly, a gust of astral wind rose up from flat ground without warning.

Yan Zhengming fetched him back, turned around at flying speed, then protected him behind himself.

“Senior, you...”

The other quickly drew in a breath, injured somewhere unknown. “I’m fine. My original packing is overall more durable than the one you broke into later — go, quick!”

The two retreated back down the road in a sorry state. As if his soul hadn’t yet returned to its spot, Cheng Qian’s sight was nearly blurred; he subconsciously supported himself against the wall, only for it to not feel right under his hand. Slightly laboriously, he looked over at it using the unknown amount of night pearls in Yan Zhenming’s hand, and came to be directly opposite of a pale, dead face.

“...”

He almost shoved out with a palm to smack his counterpart into bits.

Yan Zhengming shot out one night pearl, adding force to it. The pearl let out a miserable shriek, unable to withstand the true essence of a sword cultivator, and promptly exploded into a flying puff in midair.

The entire space around them instantly lit up. Apart from the skeletons, the area filled all around with floating ‘people’ of various appearances, all sorts of men, women, youths, and elders therein, each one pale-faced and lifeless. They were kept in poses of being directly frozen in midair, feet dangling, the spitting image of a group of silent, hanged ghosts.

In spite of Cheng Qian’s bravery, he couldn’t help but suck in a cold breath. For a moment, the roiling in his chest got even more uncomfortable. It wasn’t until the burst night pearl faded out again that he whispered, “Ghosts...”

This place was so awfully cold, that in addition to the physical body, it could freeze one’s true essence, and even soul.

“The Soul-Devouring Lamp was here before,” he said. “It got hit by a strong wind, and all the ghosts inside it got blown out, all of which became frozen here before they could flee... where is the Lamp?”

As a qualified, wealthy landlord, after Yan Zhengming released him a little, he brightened the place up again. “Look.”

A skeleton was in the corner. Once the frost covering it was lightly swept off, a fiery red feather was seen stuck between two ice-encased ribs, looking especially eye-catching amongst the ice.

“Do you think that’s Tang Zhen?” Yan Zhengming asked.

Was it?

A cultivator that had not yet entered Primordial Spirit Realm had suffered untold trials to come to the Sea of Beiming and find the Da Xue Mystic Site, or, for some unknown reason, had entered it alongside these demonic cultivators, or had simply found the hole they left behind and felt his way along, then just-so-happened to encounter the Lamp in this place, just-so-happened to get injured and die by that astral wind, yet his soul had entered the Lamp by mistake...

But, a hundred years ago, the Tang Zhen that Han Yuan and he had encountered on the coast of the East Sea... was that not a primordial spirit?

A scary hunch arose in Cheng Qian’s mind. At the same exact time, the rumbling in his ears got louder and louder — they were temporarily apart from the astral wind, but its side-effects remained. He almost couldn’t stay standing, gently leaning his side against the ice wall, doing all he could to press his forehead against its surface, and resisting the groan that nearly slipped from his mouth. The upheaval of his soul was too painful, almost as much as the severance of his primordial spirit from when he refined the wooden sword.

His temples were quickly soaked, either because of cold sweat, or melting ice.

While they fell into an ice cave on their end, the group that had already speedily gotten to Shuzong were instead feeling a bit toasty.

Shuzhong had many mountains. Upon coming here, the White Tiger Estate disciples responsible for opening up the path were always involuntarily on-edge, because the layers of these forests were likely to hide arrays. Also, since they were in the air, their opposers would be slightly more concealed, and could set up an ambush without anyone knowing.

Nian Dada held an old book as he sat on a low-flying horse, carefully studying every single word. All of a sudden, someone next to him casually read the book's title aloud. "Reincarnation Records..."

Nian Dada jumped in fright, the book almost flying out of his hands, whereupon his limbs went into a scramble to catch it. Somewhat flustered, he looked at Han Yuan, who had come over to him at some unknown point in time. "F-Fourth uncle..."

There was no doubt about it; he was a little fearful of this moody man.

Han Yuan shot him a look, but didn't make things hard for him. "Whose reincarnation are you wanting to look for?" he asked placidly.

Nian Dada tried, with difficulty, to relax a little. "My father's."

"Ah. Where was he from?"

"Mingming Valley..." After blurting that out, Nian Dada immediately corrected himself. "That doesn't seem right, actually. He used to be a wandering cultivator of the East Sea. In his youth, he was lucky enough to be selected for entry into Azure Dragon Island's Lecture Hall, and when he

entered the Dao, he then roamed the world to practice on his own after... it was only after a hundred years that he settled down in Mingming Valley, and changed his name.”

“Azure Dragon Island...” Han Yuan said expressionless after hearing this. “So, this level of chance fate can still be. I’ll give you a suggestion: when you have the time, you should look in the vicinity of the East Sea. No need to thank me.”

The legendary demonic dragon, who had nearly stabbed a hole through the sky, speaking so calmly to him stunned Nian Dada for a minute. “O... okay?” he stammered.

“Primordial spirit reincarnations are generally like this. The soul returns to its hometown or whatever... it’s useless, though. Humans in reincarnation get their cultivation and memories emptied out, so they’ll have no idea who they are, and will only barely manage to maintain the appearance and innate personality they had in their previous lives.”

Nian Dada revealed a cautious hope on his face.

Han Yuan side-eyed him, sneering. “Don’t scramble to be happy right now. Think about how you’re going to keep your own little life, first!”

Nian Dada was startled. The White Tiger Hall disciple leading the way in front suddenly let out a shrill alarm; demonic qi was seen to shoot straight into the sky in a distant forest, blocking their group’s way.

Han Yuan’s body appeared to swiftly switch owners, his entire person appeared to have a terribly no-good charisma. Black qi overflowed from his panlong robes, making that four-legged monster seem to be on the verge of showing up at any time.

“Don’t make a big deal out of nothing,” he said, red light flashing in those slender eyes. “Those idiots think that I’ve already claimed Beiming, so they want to step on my corpse and cause pandemonium.”

He laughed coldly. In the midst of Li Yun’s startled exclamation, he rose suddenly, sweeping into sky like a tornado. “And they haven’t yet seen what trash they are in the reflection of their own piss!”

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Chapter 101

“Wait! Hold on, who’s coming?” Li Yun asked.

“I don’t know, and it doesn’t matter! Get out of the way!”

Han Yuan was a demonic cultivator that had been stained with blood, in the end, and it was hard to suppress the murderous nature of those that walked the demonic path — once bloodied, the Great Dao was difficult to strive for. He had been bound by the blood oath for so long that it had long been suffocating him into unbalance. These people were completely struck with the edge of his knife.

Han Yuan had entirely become a mad dog off his leash; how could his ‘weak and delicate’ second senior haul him back?

It was unclear how many traps were laid in the forests beneath, but the neatly-arranged array was completed, weaving into a big net that covered the sky, having specially waited here for them to walk into the trap. The big net pressed down in the air, and the demonic dragon’s figure flashed out to welcome it without any reserve; the two colliding made even the landscape shudder, the clouds tremble, and all the fauna around startle.

There were many ordinary disciples of White Tiger Estate in this group that couldn’t move as easily as the experts, nor could they control their panicked flying horses on top of that, dodging unattractively about in the air like headless flies.

“Land, land!” an Estate elder randomly ordered.

The sky instantly went dark, the encompassing net above their heads flashing with sparks of demonic qi from time to time, which resembled quick little lightning bolts. Han Yuan’s was thick-skinned, so letting the

sparks hit him a few times was nothing mentionable, but for the young accompanying disciples, they were not so lucky. Swiped to the side by the sparks as bystanders, they immediately dropped down from the sky with bodies of scorched black.

Li Yun sighed. From a snap of his fingers, a white light shot up to the sky, and he abandoned his horse to stand upon his flying sword with his hands behind his back. “There are ambushes on the ground. Everyone, please calm down, and don’t descend. Juniors of lower cultivation, draw back to the middle, and concentrate on forming the Eight-Trigram Array above.”

“You’re right!” that same elder hurriedly say. “Don’t land! All of you come up, quick!”

“...”

This elder had to have been chosen by the mighty Estate Lord Shang as a joke.

Second Lord Li increasingly felt that he was bearing a heavy task, yet had no choice in the matter, compelled to swallow the pill and awkwardly instruct this big group of unfamiliar disciples in constructing the array to withstand the big net in the sky.

All of a sudden, the hairs on his back stood up all at once. Believing in his own intuition without a thought, he threw out a charm from his sleeve; the tiny wooden tablet was seen to rise up in the air and suddenly expand, forming a protective barrier of vibrant lights.

As soon as the charm came out, he had regretted it. Yan Zhengming had gotten it off of the black market, and the reason he had never been willing to pawn it was because it had purportedly switched hands from Tong Ru.

Before he had time to be in pain, he heard a burst of sky-splitting thunder.

An Estate disciple of meager cultivation bled from all seven orifices at once, then fell straight off of the back of his flying horse.

Back in the day, beside Vermillion Bird Tower, Shui Keng's yao skeleton separating hadn't given off such loud thunder. Li Yun was terrified, sensing that this heavenly tribulation was specifically coming for Han Yuan.

Immediately following this, the sound of rending silk burst through the air. The protective barrier of the charm couldn't withstand this, slowly tearing down the middle annihilated in no time flat.

The priceless wooden tablet split right in half, then fell right down.

Han Yuan whirled and landed upon a sword that had lost its owner in the chaos, traces of the black dragon looming upon his face. The oath mark on the back of his hand was as red as blood. He looked up at the big net with a malicious expression.

That heavenly tribulation had been none other than the backlash of the oath.

Several lines of demonic qi rushed out of the forest — it was demonic cultivators that had made the stumbling blocks here, and they surrounded him.

What was odd was that there were several ordinary cultivators mixed in with them, each one having expressions of hatred. One of them even shouted, "Nefarious devil! Before the Ten-Party Array, those vile, spineless people were forced by your sect backer, so we didn't dare to do anything to you, but we'll be taking our revenge, now!"

As a representative of that 'sect backer', Li Yun felt like someone had affixed a shit platter to his head. He had no idea what to even say.

Han Yuan looked at the guy indifferently. “Oh, so in order to get rid of the nefarious devil that is me, you all have joined forces with a big group of devils that has done no less evil than I have? You all are really flexible. It’s really admirable.”

Li Yun’s anger was dissolved at hearing this, and he smiled. “The biggest thing he has in common with his heart demon form and this greatness is that smart mouth.”

The smart-mouthed Han Yuan completely enraged the cultivators that were suddenly mingling with demonic cultivators. With paired looks in their eyes, they attacked as a group, simultaneously drawing in on Han Yuan with weapons drawn under the protection of the big net overhead.

They were of the righteous path, and didn’t massacre, nor violate taboo. Their methods were low-class, but there was nothing inexcusable about taking revenge. With the blood oath, Han Yuan could only get beaten, else if he dared to retaliate and injure them, it might bring on another that giant tribulation that even the preceding Lord Beiming wouldn’t have been able to defend against.

Han Yuan knit his brows, gathered up his sleeves and moved his body to dodged, then roared at the one behind him without turning his head, “Li Yun, what are you doing, idiot? Watching the excitement?!”

Li Yun expressionlessly folded his arms in front of his chest. “The biggest difference between the heart demon and this greatness is that the demon is really fucking worthless.”

As Shui Keng listened from the side, she was filled with indignation. “Hey, second brother! Are you waning before you’re even old? Why are you talking so much trash?! Tell us how we’re going to fight this!”

...This sect just was not compatible.

Li Yun drew out the ornament-like sword on his waist, then raised his voice to the elder. “Please stop these few, fellow Daoists of White Tiger Estate! Shui Keng, use True Fire of Samadbi to break open this net to make an escape route for the massive cuck that is your fourth brother. If I’m not mistaken, the eye of the array is outside, at kun position!”

Shui Keng immediately transformed into a Red Crane and whirled away. The tiny sparks on the demonic net were a complete disgrace in comparison to the True Fire, and she quickly tore open a hole in it.

Nian Dada hurriedly came in close. “Second uncle, what about me?”

With a flip of his fingers, Li Yun took out a big sheet of paper from his cuffs somehow, then tapped it. It shattered into millions of pieces and scattered in the wind, transforming into bugs of all sizes. It could really give one goosebumps.

The bugs descended from the skies, sank into the forest vegetation, and vanished in the blink of an eye. He tossed a small bottle to Nian Dada. “The bottom of that bottle can be use to see through the eyes of those insects. Keep watch on it for me. I’m getting the feeling that this won’t be so simple.”

Nian Dada hurriedly rubbed the goosebumps off of himself as he held the small bottle in his hands. As he attempted rapidly read through the ground’s live situation via countless fragmentary images, he strenuously learned the hardship of having too many eyes and limbs.

The Estate had the elder to command it, and the disciples were barely able to get organized. After coming back to themselves, they quickly swarmed up and intercepted those water-muddying righteous cultivators on Han Yuan’s behalf. Both sides fought and berated each other; following the elder’s lead, they had first elegantly sent regards to their counterpart’s sect,

and after the fighting had turned white-hot, they started to hostilely send regards to each other's long-buried parents.

Seeing they were mutually holding each other up, Han Yuan easily passed through the circle of cultivators, turned into a puff of black mist, then went through the hole Shui Keng had made, following which he reached out his hand, then mysteriously and grabbed the array's in the Southwest orientation, from very far away.

The entire Shu road appeared to be getting hauled off of the mountain by him, and the huge net burst open in the sky.

Those several demonic cultivators that had just been talking big saw that this was not a great situation, immediately thinking to flee. A drawn-out, tyrannical dragon's roar sounded through the air, rolling, dark clouds of bloody qi permeating all around thereafter — in a split second's time, eight expressionless Han Yuans showed up in every direction. "Where are you all going?" they said at the same time.

Shui Keng was dumbstruck seeing this. Feeling as if she had found a new direction in life, she turned into human form, then said thoughtfully, "I now understand what the eldest meant when he said that the Great Dao had three thousands paths that lead to the same destination."

Li Yun believed that she had reached enlightenment, but before he had time to be gratified, he heard his junior sister proclaim with feeling: "It turns out that apart from the completely unreliable Ninth Chain, all paths can be this powerful!"

"..."

This senior really couldn't do this anymore.

Suddenly, Nian Dada let out an *ah* from nearby.

“What are you spooked for?” Li Yun asked, unhappy.

“Second uncle, a group of people... no, that’s not right, ghosts just came up from the ground, and are crawling faster than the wind!”

Li Yun’s nerves tensed up hearing the word ‘ghosts’, pupils constricting. Making a sweeping motion, the countless crawling bugs he had only just scattered into the soil each leapt up, then successively exploded in the air, burning into balls of flames of different sizes that cleared away the cloud layers and remnant black fog from the demonic cultivators that was under everyone’s feet. The ground’s abnormality was revealed right before their eyes.

An Estate elder’s scalp prickled. “The Soul-Devouring Lamp!”

Li Yun looked grave, shooting a look at Han Yuan from a distance. Why such a coincidence?

Yet, he now had no free time to mull over this. The thick black clouds that had been billowing on the ground swept up into the blue sky, eerie and rancid deathly qi hitting the face as the landscape went dark.

Nian Dada couldn’t help but think back to that mountain cave from the first time he had left Mingming Valley to follow Cheng Qian, instinctively getting an indescribable shiver.

Amongst the ground’s dancing ghosts, a familiar figure suddenly stuck out — Jiang Peng.

Over a hundred years ago, Li Yun and rest had seen him for the first time at the East Sea. He had no longer been human-like then, but now, after so many years had passed, his form was even more shocking.

From the waist down, he was completely hidden by billowing black smoke, making it look like he had no lower half at all, floating in midair. For a second, it was hard to tell whether he was a ghost cultivator, or just a ghost, as his cheeks were as thin as the living dead, the large splotches of shadows on his face unable to be driven away, even in midday sunlight.

He sized up the crowd in the air, then grinned toothily. Locking his gaze onto Han Yuan, he licked his lips, the voice that came out of them rough. “Beiming...”

The aggrieved Han Yuan powerlessly took back all of his body doubles. “Didn’t you say that he was broken into fragments by the previous Lord Beiming a century ago?” the heart demon form asked himself. “Why did he piss himself in fear for all that time, and now can’t even tell whether I’m the real Beiming or not when he got back?”

With that, his expression abruptly changed, speech getting turned into the real Han Yuan’s. “The last I saw him, he seemed to still be able to recognize people, and wasn’t so awfully mad... is he really the owner of the Soul-Devouring Lamp? Why does it look like he’s about to be no different than those ghosts, to me?”

“Hmph. Really, as long as this Lord shows my face, it’s no effort at all to find these morons,” the demon answered. “They’ll all just come right to the door themselves, looking for a fight. Might as well catch them all in one net.”

Han Yuan rapidly switched back, looking stern. “How about you boast less. You really think that anyone is praising you as being entitled to call yourself Beiming? That’s my Master’s senior brother, and he dared to go nuts kidnapping in the vicinity of Azure Dragon Island before I even entered the sect. It’s not a certainty who would sort who out.”

The Estate elder happened to hear this entire ridiculous thread of him talking to himself, and he couldn't help but feel sorrow come up inside him, feeling that his life could be forfeited right now — the two biggest demons of the past century were meeting on this narrow road, one a lunatic, and the other... also a lunatic.

Now, countless whispering noises came up from the ground, as if thousands of ghosts were speaking to each other, making any human ears hearing it shiver. The huge mirage of an oil lamp raised into the air. Resentful energy swooshed up, whirling into a hurricane, innumerable human faces shown to pile up together in the rotations. This scalp-numbing tornado imperviously charged at the stunned cultivators in the sky. In the vivacious Shuzhong forest, all the plants and animals swept up by the black mist withered to nothing as the insatiable ghosts absorbed all life force.

Nian Dada couldn't believe whatsoever that this guy had once been that filthy and pathetic demonic cultivator that had been half-dead near Mingming Valley and adhered himself to Liu Lang.

Jiang Peng had recovered... no, he was even stronger than he had been a hundred years ago!

A crackling firecracker set off in Han Yuan's mouth, but he didn't dare to be careless. Hands horizontal across his chest, a heavy, dragon-etched sword slowly emerged from his palm. The ghost cultivators on the ground and demonic cultivators in the sky swapped gazes from a distance, then moved at the same exact time.

Jiang Peng appeared to be provoked by Han Yuan's sword, and used a ghastly bone he held in hand for a sword technique.

These two had been taught from the same sect, and in this occasion, they coincidentally both used Fuyao Wooden Sword to confront each other. The technique that had once been honest and peaceful once again expressed its

erratic side; sustaining vast demonic qi, without any sort of indisposition at all, it developed a demonic path version of itself all on its own.

Li Yun slapped the back of Nian Dada's head. "Why aren't you getting out of the way? You want to die?"

While he spoke, the earth and sky were already wholly covered by rampaging demonic qi. No matter what side one was on, they all ignored the fighting to step aside, not daring to interfere in the mighty battle of two devils.

However, a bold one yet came — the swishing sound of a sharp sword being unsheathed was heard from not far away, and then extremely bright swordlight obliquely slashed over, coming to flagrantly get between the two devils.

A sword of the primordial spirit!

Li Yun looked elated at first, thinking that Yan Zhengming had hurried back early, only to be shocked soon after — that wasn't right. This sword cultivator had a primordial spirit, but he was not on the same level as their eldest, where he had entered the second layer of Sword Spirit Realm.

Upon another look, the newcomer was You Liang of the Celestial Divination Bureau.

His sword collided with the bone Jiang Peng held, and the power of the charms on the sword's body abruptly rose. Like a newborn calf not afraid of a tiger, it pounced at the ghostly qi lingering about the bone with a sharp hiss; the qi was like a flame meeting a great wind, jerking around a bit for a moment, then counterattacking tenfold.

Han Yuan's sword held Jiang Peng's qi back while he also smacked You Liang away. "Don't go looking for death right under my nose," he coldly

said. “You’ll burden me with divine tribulations! Scram!”

You Liang’s sword was already visibly infected with black qi. His complexion immediately paled, but his expression remain calmed as he spoke as quickly as he could. “Senior, I’ve come to deliver a message: Black Tortoise Hall, headed by Bian Xu, has congregated a group of cultivators that has deep enmity with you, and intends to put you to death. These people are just a pretense; they have a follow-up move. I don’t know how they found out your route, but a friend of mine is now doing his best to stall time for you. You’d best leave, now!”

During those few sentences, Han Yuan and Jiang Pen had already had more than a hundred exchanges. Both of their faces were emitting black qi. They met force with force, neither willing to be roundabout, and both heavily injured by their respective counterpart. Neither heard You Liang’s words.

The two madmen didn’t, but Li Yun wasn’t deaf. His thought rapidly whirled — as a sword cultivator of solitary nature, You Liang’s alleged ‘friend’ was, at most, a member of the Bureau. The Bureau had suffered heavy losses and fallen apart, so who still had the spare time to care about them?

It had to be Zhe Shi!

Shui Keng had a very rare moment of quick reaction. She had always had the responsibility of exchanging messages with Zhe Shi, so she naturally had communication tools; hearing this, she quickly took out a gray sparrow’s feather, and in no more than a few moment, one end of the feature lost its vitality, dimming down.

“It really is Brother Zhe Shi!”

“Han Yuan, stop!” Li Yun shouted.

Han Yuan didn't seem to hear... or, he had heard it, but this situation no longer tolerated him deciding to stop.

A paper bug that had jumped the furthest away was now faithfully feeding back information that it saw to Li Yun. Looking into the distance using its eyes, he got goosebumps all over his body — less than five li away, a massive array, using an unknown amount of peoples' true essences to operate it, was in the middle of spreading out, and slowly closing up!

Li Yun grit his teeth and pulled the wooden hairpin off of his head, which transformed into a sword.

Were it not a last resort, he never would have wanted to use this thing. Yan Zhengming had left it for him to save his own life with, one of his own primordial spirit swords sealed within.

As soon as Li Yun used the wooden hairpin-slash-sword, Yan Zhengmign immediately felt it on his end.

However, he had no time to care about him right now, as Cheng Qian had just collapsed in front of him without any warning at all. As if enduring unbelievable pain, his hand that clenched Shuang Ren inadvertently pressed against its edge; in this dim light, Yan Zhengming hadn't realized that the other had unwittingly cut himself until he smelled the stink of blood.

Shuang Ren madly sucked in its master's blood, so excited, it vaguely had the intent to backlash.

“Xiao Qian! Xiao Qian!”

“Tang Zhen... he... is the primordial spirit cultivated from the Soul-Devouring Lamp...” Cheng Qian squeezed out from between his teeth, bearing with the sharp pain.

The whole sequence of events had quickly linked up in his mind — Tang Zhen, who'd had low cultivation back then, had probably done the same as them. Upon arriving at the center of the Sea of Beiming, he had followed the passage that these demonic cultivators had opened up in the Da Xue Mystic Site, but before he could find the Golden Lotus Leaf, he had been struck by the astral wind, his soul separating from its body.

He should have died with his soul flown off like those demonic cultivators had, but, both fortunately and unfortunately, his soul happened to get blown into the Lamp.

A masterless Soul-Devouring Lamp, whose ghosts had all dissipated.

Such a coincidence was akin to a blind turtle floating up into a cave. Just like how Cheng Qian's soul had entered the Spirit-Collection Jade in the split second he was dying, Tang Zhen had received this divine chance to survive, if with difficulty.

One did not need to think to know that with the Lamp being a greatly evil object, while the Jade had been a spiritual object for helping human cultivation, Tang Zhen had to have suffered a thousand times more than Cheng Qian had inside of it...

Yet, he hadn't had a choice. Either he had to refine the Lamp, or it would completely consume him.

In the end, Tang Zhen had won. He had cultivated his primordial spirit, becoming the Lamp itself.

But, this form was doubtlessly incomplete, because something as evil as the Lamp had been tainted by who-knew-how-much karmic sin since its creation. Had he completely refined it into a corporeal body, he would presumably not incur divine tribulations, but divine wrath.

As soon as the Heavens got angry, it could have chopped this Site into firewood. It There was no way a living thing could have withstood it.

Unless...

Cheng Qian's voice was barely audible as he muttered seeming nonsense to himself. "Why did those demonic cultivators come here...?"

Legends told that the Golden Lotus Leaf of Da Xue could wash away all the sins of the human world. Could it also have washed away those of the Lamp? Could it have been washed so thoroughly clean, that it became an ordinary spiritual object... just like the Spirit-Collection Jade?

Cheng Qian couldn't help but think deeply about that layer of it. Had Tang Zhen actually been powerless against the little bird yao and their charm, and thus had fled?

It was only a puppet charm. Tang Zhen would have had a hundred different ways to surpass it.

He hadn't feared that he would hear the precedent, then take his old path to the Site to investigate the Lamp's trail?

Or... had Tang Zhen intentionally wanted him to come here?

Cheng Qian felt cold all over. All sorts of thought flashed rapidly by him. Before he could open his mouth, Hear the Universe suddenly brightened within his inner sanctum, and his entire spiritual consciousness got dragged in by it — he saw that the jade appeared to have been provoked, as it harshly illuminated his inner sanctum. His injured primordial spirit could barely open its eyes in there.

His consciousness was so outrageously sensitive, it even faintly implicated the tiny section that had been sealed inside Yan Zhengming's wooden

sword. He felt like he was being split into two... no, three.

All of his memories were spread out by some unknown outer force, from Fuyao Mountain to Azure Dragon Island, page by page, regardless of detail. Then, those scenes seemed to get randomly tampered with by a hand, and the sect siblings that depended on each other for survival changed into repulsive-looking arch-nemeses, all of their warmth morphed into bone-chilling hatred.

On one hand, he was maintaining his sanity beneath Hear the Universe's glaring brilliance, able to clearly distinguish what was reality and what was an illusion, but on the other, he couldn't suppress the hate that seeming to be coming from the bottom of his heart.

At the same time, it was like he had a third eye, which was looking back anxiously from inside the wooden sword.

There was a voice repeating inside of his spiritual consciousness. "Kill him... kill him..."

This was... soul-painting!

Back when Tang Zhen had returned his memories, soul-painting had been inside them.

He was both clear-headed, yet hardly able to withstand the murderousness welling up in his heart; he couldn't feel Shuang Ren slicing his palm at all.

Shang Wan'nian hadn't actually set a trap for him. In normal circumstances, Hear the Universe could indeed have helped him resist soul-painting, to say nothing of the fact that a small piece of his primordial spirit was in Yan Zhengming's wooden sword, which couldn't be affected. Yet, he just had to come across nefarious wind that could break the soul here...

He no longer had the time to think about whether this was just a coincidence, or something someone had deliberately set up.

—

The translator says: I just want y'all to know that 'massive cuck' was not an exaggeration. ' ' = 'living tortoise', where 'living' is a term of emphasis, and 'tortoise' is slang for 'cuckold'.

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Chapter 102

The wooden sword bearing a piece of Cheng Qian's primordial spirit shuddered violently. Yan Zhengming held it with boundless bewilderment, sensing the painful resonance between it and the one that refined it.

He wasn't sure what was going on with Cheng Qian, but made a quick decision. "I'll take you away from here before anything else, and then we can talk about anything needed."

Then, he reached out to hold him, only for Cheng Qian to instinctively lift his head and shoot a palm at him.

Murderous qi now overflowed everywhere. As soon as this strike was made, Cheng Qian was immediately terrified, quickly taking back all of the frigid true essence that was surging into his palm. As a result, the high-lifted palm gently fell, lightly waving Yan Zhengming away with extreme restraint, yet didn't injure him in the slightest.

Heavy true essence having left and come back, the force of the backlash shook half of Cheng Qian's body numb. He choked out a mouthful of blood at once that dyed his own lapels red, his chaotic consciousness temporarily incited into soberness by the pain.

"What are you doing?!" Yan Zhengming asked in horror.

Cheng Qian ignored him. First of all, that would be a long story, and second of all, he himself wasn't too clear on it, plus really didn't have the strength to explain.

Yet, he also knew well that if he said some nonsense to Yan Zhengming to make him leave, the other would not only not listen, but get even more nervous and come in close. Hence was why Cheng Qian had to silently

push him away, biting the tip of his own tongue until he was clear-headed from the pain inside his bloody-tasting mouth. He simply and efficiently popped his limbs out of their joints, then seized this time to concentrate on his inner sanctum, draw all of his true essence into his qi sea — regardless of how turbulent said essence was — and focused in on colliding it against the seal Shang Wan'nian had left in his primordial spirit.

Prior to his death, Shang Wan'nian had been worried that his damaged primordial spirit would not be able to handle Hear the Universe's inheritance and sealed it up, only to be unsealed on its own if his spirit was fully repaired. He couldn't give that much consideration to that now, though; he was burning to release Hear the Universe, wanting to use its help to get rid of the soul-painting Tang Zhen had placed upon him.

As for whether he could endure that brutal inheritance, he wasn't considering that at all.

When factors permitted, he would always be dependable in conduct. When he was truly forced to dire straits, he would believe that there was nothing he couldn't do.

Yan Zhengming felt that the encompassing child was momentarily going towards Cheng Qian, making him shiver with the cold when it brushed by him, and then that a tiny, ear-shaped mark was shining between his brows.

Inside this Site, encountered lamps were blown out, encountered wicks drawn out, not a trace of light tolerated at all — and yet, that radiant sigil wasn't affected in the slightest, brightening and brightening until he could clearly see the bloodstains upon Cheng Qian's pale lips, and the hovering black qi between his brows.

He couldn't fathom what was happening here, too afraid to step forward. By his intuition, this appeared to be some sort of mysterious inheritance, but the time and place was wrong.

Moreover, what kind of inheritance would make him self-harm?

Yan Zhengming had never heard of one before. He also didn't know if interrupting an inheritance partway through would do something to Cheng Qian.

Since he would never dare to risk him, Yan Zhengming could only take the wooden sword back into his inner sanctum, using the force of his own primordial spirit to repeatedly sooth the trembling weapon.

The wooden sword was his origin sword, after all. Over time, he had come to feel a weak resonance inside it, like he was hearing a distant, faint bell.

He was not allowed to think more on that before he suddenly felt the Site beneath him begin to shake, the sound of raging waves heard through the partition of the thick ice.

The waters of Beiming outside were resonating with whatever was between Cheng Qian's brows!

Yan Zhengming put on the utmost of guard, his entire body practically tensing up into a sword itself. *Just the seawater resonating is fine, but there can't be—*

The second he had that thought, he heard sharp wind sound through the Site once more — that bizarre gale returned in a whirl without any sort of warning. This time, it actually bypassed the skeletons in front of them to exactly give chase!

He pretty much wanted to laugh in pain. For the first time, he was learning that he, too, had a misfortune-spewing crow's beak.

Even though sword cultivators couldn't be said to be made of metal, their bodies were forged the year round, and were certainly not made of clay.

Ordinary swords couldn't hurt him at all, but with a mere sweep of that wind, several half-chi long wounds had been left behind on him, making his back feel wave after wave of sweeping, unbearable pain even now.

Taking a deep look at the completely out-of-it Cheng Qian, Yan Zhengming called the wooden sword out and held it in hand. All his primordial spirit swords lined up in a row beside him, the entire boundary of 'Enter the Sheath' opening, creating a sword realm within the Mystic Site.

The Site was rocked by the vicious inheritance of Hear the Universe. As if it was discovering the intruder after the fact, the astral wind that had only just swept in front of them pounced right for Cheng Qian.

Yan Zhengming swiftly used the spirit swords to weave an expansive net of them. With a low shout, he refused to yield one minor step, about to firmly isolate the mountain of snow's anger to the outside.

The sword realm and astral wind collided on a narrow path. In an instant, millions of rays burst apart, the sharp weapons that cut iron like it was clay now continuously bent and broken within the strong and angry gust. Just one exchange, and the sword realm was instantly half-trampled flat.

Cold light reflected on the walls, bright candles dimmed. The sound of metal and rock was endless in the ears. Yan Zhengming's long hair had been completely blown loose by the leaked wind, and his long robes were moving erratically, getting a few new tears made in them every once in a while, which made them nearly ragged after not that long.

Then, he shut his eyes lightly, allowing the swordwill of Fuyao Wooden Sword tirelessly surge into his hands.

He had once believed that after Cheng Qian died before, he would not have been able to open the mountain-sealing order in any capacity. He had thought that there would come a day where he could use his own power to

suppress the spiritual consciousnesses of Sect Leaders past in the Sect Leader Seal, then forcefully circumvent the order to make Fuyao Mountain reappear in the human world.

In front of him at this moment was the entire treacherous Mystic Site deep in Beiming, while he held a wooden sword, as motionless as a mountain...

With how much of a life-cherishing person I am, why am I always running into death-seeking things?

The skill of 'Enter the Sheath' was more reserved in edge, yet also more drawn-out.

And those that were violent would not be for long.

He alone began to endlessly exchange back-and-forth with the Site. Not a trace of sword qi was seen around his body, as it was rushing from his inner sanctum and into the sword realm non-stop.

Constantly blown down by the overbearing wind, then constantly standing back up again.

There were no days, nor nights in this mountain of snow. He had no idea how long he had been holding on, himself. A long-missed ache gradually emerged in all of his meridians, like sticking needles; this meant that his internal true essence was about to be exhausted.

He hadn't experienced this feeling of running out of power for who-knew-how long, and couldn't help but turn back to look at Cheng Qian. The other's face was as pale as paper, yet he seemed to be able to draw infinite strength from it.

All of a sudden, he felt quite strange. He had been under the impression that with his own fearful nature that feared any sort of pain and suffering, he

absolutely would not have been able to persevere when his wick was about to go out, bound to tidy up his appearance, sit down, and wait to die upon encountering something like this — but, once Cheng Qian was near him, everything changed.

Cheng Qian could transform him from a ‘delicate’ crisp to a worn rag that could never be wrung dry. Even if it didn’t look pretty, once twisted hard, it could always hold up for a little while.

The needly pain gradually spread all over him. His limbs seemed like they were getting torn off in a stern warning to him from his baked-dry meridian. Ignoring it wholly, he abruptly withdrew his full-body barrier, and then all his spirit swords rose up high. In a second, his inner sanctum was entirely emptied, a rumbling in his ears — and then he pushed out the swords with a palm!

The spirit swords changed into swordwill on the spot. There was no place they did not go, counter-attacking like they were going to topple the mountain and overturn the sea, a howl going through the air that was close to the roar of a beast. The astral wind of the Site was legitimately shoved backwards by him.

Entire body swaying, he actually began to seep blood. He struck his sword against the ground to forcibly stand, but the look in his eyes was already dulled, and he unconsciously mumbled, “Xiao Qian...”

His inability to protect the young Cheng Qian had always been his lifelong regret. Owing to the passage of time, the other had become so powerful, he didn’t need him at all; only the surplus dread from the past dimly entrenched his heart, forever impossible to shake off.

A smil of unclear meaning showed at the corner of his mouth, and then he fainted while standing up.

The wooden sword left his hand, but didn't fall. Its tip pointed down as it hung in midair, the utmost of loyal to its duty as it defended his front.

However, after waiting for a minute, an even stronger counterattack did not come. The astral wind had somehow been broken up by the swordwill, meandering back into Da Xue's depths.

Cheng Qian's overwrought spiritual consciousness within the wooden sword sighed in relief. What he felt right now defied description; all of his consciousness was split into two parts, one half in his body, and the other in this sword. It was like he had two brains deliberating at the exact same time, even interfering with each other. He was now experiencing Han Yuan's own feelings, whether it was from the soul-painting, or the strangeness of being divided into two.

The consciousness in his body was desperately resisting the influence of soul-painting, and maintaining his final piece of rationality before he could open Hear the Universe's seal. The consciousness in the sword was instead defending Yan Zhengming, and reflecting upon the events within the noisy disturbance of that soul-painting.

Seeing that the astral wind had withdraw, Cheng Qian had a brief bit of respite, though the suspicions inside of him floated upwards — what meaning was there behind soul-painting's suggestion?

What reason did Tang Zhen have to try to make him kill Yan Zhengming?

If Tang Zhen was said to have done this to incite the world into chaos, then he probably would have wanted to get rid of Han Yuan, Shang Wan'nian, and the others, but there was no way he hadn't figured out Yan Zhengming. The total of sore spots on their Sect Leader's body could be counted on one hand, so as long as no one bumped into him, he could peacefully remain on Fuyao Mountain for a lifetime, never taking the initiative to go looking for trouble.

What sense was there in Tang Zhen provoking such a fierce and almighty sword cultivator for no reason, and also taking such great troubles to swindle him into the Da Xue Mystic Site?

Even if Tang Zhen was actually insane and just had to use him to get at Yan Zhengming's life, why hadn't he just done it while on the Mountain, where they had had so many times in both the day and night where guards were down, and Yan Zhengming would have had absolutely no way to escape? Why did it have to be here?

Having expected the danger that was at every step of the Site, and also being unable to see a thing, the two of them had had very tense nerves ever since they entered this place, making sneak attacks nearly impossible.

Why did Tang Zhen believe that as long as he attacked, Yan Zhengming would be certain to die?

Cheng Qian was a cultivator with a primordial spirit that had undergone seven lightning tribulations; he was far different from the low-cultivation, easy-to-control Han Yuan from back in the day. Were he to find something off about himself, he would definitely resist it. If Tang Zhen believed that he was so scatterbrained that he could casually injure a Sword Spirit Realm cultivator, then he was really viewing him too highly.

What was the use of Tang Zhen setting the soul-painting buried on him off right now, other than to alert the enemy?

Yan Zhengming was only unconscious for a short bit before he woke. He leaned against the wall in a sorry state, first sensing the disordered direction of the wind in the Site, then snatching the opportunity to regulate his true essence. Following a long period of slow breaths, he inclined his head to look at the motionless Cheng Qian. "Not dead yet... hey... when are you getting up and brushing my hair?"

The ear sigil between Cheng Qian's brows seemed to get brighter as he continued to pierce the increasingly teetering seal. That familiar cauterizing sensation that seemed like it was going to burn him into a pile of ash once again rushed into his internal organs, which inevitably affected his spiritual consciousness that was active in the wooden sword, causing it to make a soft hum.

Yan Zhengming tore his eyes off of Cheng Qian, then lifted his head to look into Da Xue Mountain's depths. With just one glance, some kind of indescribable impulse arose in his mind, as if the Site had something inside of it that had an unspeakably magnetic force to him, causing his heart to jump like mad.

However, he did not move, hand slowly rubbing across the wooden sword. "Strange. All of a sudden, it feels like you've just gotten out of the bath."

Cheng Qian's spiritual consciousness, currently doing all it could to perceive Hear the Universe's situation, had the misfortune of hearing this, and nearly got jolted out by the wooden sword that was incessantly shuddering.

Yan Zhengming stood up three paces away from Cheng Qian; both not close enough to bother him, but also place him completely within his line of sight. Like so, he appeared to be able to resist the inexplicable magnetism in Da Xue's depths.

He lightly licked his chapped lips, feeling that there there was not only something off with himself, but even the entire Site had been excited by something.

Suddenly, he blinked forcefully, only to see a ray of light pierce from deep within the Site, looking like broken bits of pure gold in the darkness. There was only one line, at first, and then it slowly unfurled, millions of golden flowers blooming in that place most black.

A mysterious, secluded halo in this land of ice swayed to and fro, shining all over the place like clear glints of light on waves, resembling an immortal paradise in the human realm.

This scene was beyond description. Anyone who saw it would not be able to resist drawing in a breath.

Yan Zhengming was struck mute for a long time. A guess suddenly flashed past his mind — was that the Golden Lotus Leaf of Da Xue?

It actually existed?

The instant that golden light emerged, Cheng Qian felt that the soul-painting in his inner sanctum could no longer be suppressed. Black qi immediately invaded his sanctum, his weak primordial spirit nearly drowned in it, where only the corner of it that Hear the Universe was in remained holding up.

He, who had been unmoving with his eyes closed, abruptly opened them. They were colder than when he normally used his techniques, nearly bottomless.

Yan Zhengming finally snapped out of it. “You’re awake, dear ancestor?”

Cheng Qian paid him no heed, though, bones and joints issuing crisp sounds as he then got up unsteadily, entire body covered in frost. His movements were extremely stiff and unnatural, the blood-strained Shuang Ren he held permeated with a murderous aura that wasn’t concealed in the least.

At exactly this moment, the wooden sword in Yan Zhengming’s hand suddenly shook off his control. Taking advantage of the other’s moment of inattentiveness, Cheng Qian’s spiritual consciousness temporarily took

control over the sword, striking a band of sword qi at himself that had been accumulated for a long time.

Yan Zhengming grabbed the wooden sword's hilt, but it was still too late to stop it. He helplessly watched as the sword qi embedded itself straight into Cheng Qian's body.

He knew, of course, that the wooden sword was haunted by a part of Cheng Qian himself. "Cheng Qian, are you on the wrong meds?!" he yelled, shocked and angry.

The other's body swayed, seeming to know no pain. Frost formed up from his neck to suffuse his face, blood already flowing down from the corner of his mouth, and yet he was unaware, staring out in front of him with a lifeless gaze. That blank-eyed look seemed exceptionally familiar...

Yan Zhengming's back went cold — this was soul-painting!

Cheng Qian's grip on Shuang Ren was slack, its tip dragging across the ice, making a sound that hurt the teeth. Gait nearly a lurch, he walked, step by step, over to Yan Zhengming.

Does he want to kill me?

That idea flitted past Yan Zhengming's mind at flying speed, his entire body going cold, from his head to the soles of his feet. He stood stock-still where he was, in inner turmoil.

Then, a burst of golden light suddenly flickered out of the corner of his eyes. His heart beat heavily — right, the Golden Lotus Leaf!

Regardless of who had harmed Cheng Qian, and when they had, as long as he could get the Leaf, dealing with soul-painting would be nothing.

Embracing this notion, he tightly gripped the wooden sword, prevented Cheng Qian from injuring himself with his sword qi, and flew for the light source of the Leaf.

Cheng Qian's consciousness in the sword immediately understood what he was going to do. *Senior! Stop!*

Yet, no one could hear a sword's words.

Tang Zhen had guided them here, using the astral wind inside to send his soul into turmoil, which led to the soul-painting.

That guy was proficient in all sorts of soul-cursing techniques, so why had he picked out soul-painting?

In the span of a spark, a guess suddenly arose in his mind — since Yan Zhengming had once encountered true soul-painting at the East Sea, he could recognize it. No one in the Fuyao Sect would forget it.

Tang Zhen had to know that Cheng Qian wouldn't be able to kill Yan Zhengming; he was just alarming him. If he was trapped by soul-painting, what would Yan Zhengming's first reaction be?

It didn't need explanation. He would go for the Leaf.

In that moment, Cheng Qian's sword-consciousness acutely fluctuated, nearly affecting Yan Zhengming's inner sanctum. The latter felt the familiar consciousness, instinctively pausing.

Cheng Qian decisively drew his sword-consciousness back into his own inner sanctum by force. Wrapped up in Enter the Sheath's sword qi taken from the wooden sword, it slashed open Hear the Universe's seal.

The loosened seal fell apart in an instant. The spiritual object in his inner sanctum flared brightly, as if it was going to burn all of his innards black. That abominable, nefarious technique placed on the space between his brows was swept away like a rotten leaf, the soul-painting eliminated in an instant.

Immediately after that, an even harsher test arrived.

His body seeming like it was burning. The fine frost that had just formed on him visibly melted away, soaking his hair and clothes through in the blink of an eye. The senses of his primordial spirit and corporeal form were disconnected, pretty much like how it was before his body made from the Spirit-Collection Jade was formed, on that first time he had nearly been hacked by a heavenly tribulation.

Losing control of his body, he limply collapsed.

The Site started trembling. Not caring that he had been hit by soul-painting, Yan Zhengming grabbed Cheng Qian's hand and pulled him into his arms. *If he wants to kill me, then he can*, he thought.

Yan Zhengming almost jolted from the burn Cheng Qian's sweltering body gave him, after which the astral wind that had vanished once again started flying about at random, its sharp, blade-like edges crashing around the Site like a wild horse off of its reins, going completely off the walls.

He held Cheng Qian tightly. At almost the exact same time, the Site collapsed beneath their feet. Using his sword qi to attack and defend the both of them, a protective barrier formed, engulfing them as they rolled down together into the Site's abyss.

Chapter 103

It was absolutely unknown how deep this Site went. Yan Zhengming's body-protecting sword qi was akin to a sand castle on the beach, getting rebuilt countless times, then broken down countless times.

Was this actually the Da Xue Mystic Site?

Where were they heading to?

Were they to keep falling down like this, would they eventually end up falling to the bottom of the Sea of Beiming?

He had thought that he had seen the Leaf giving off light, which would have meant, that they were in the heart of the Site, but only now did he realize that that golden light had a very strong penetrating power, spreading out all over the place while the Golden Lotus itself was still thousands and thousands of li away.

He got the misperception that the reason why all of Beiming was so dark was because all the light was focused in on that Golden Lotus.

His defending sword qi crumbled once again, and he couldn't muster the strength to condense another one, forcing himself to withstand the astral wind as he tightly guarded Cheng Qian in his arms.

He remembered what Cheng Qian had told to him in the Valley of No Sorrow; legend told that in a place where there was no life nor death, their Master and martial grandfather would remain together forever in, nothing else around except for some minor ghosts that refused to stay for long.

Yan Zhengming had never told Cheng Qian about the indescribable bond between those two, but he was secretly gratified about that conclusion.

If one could reunite with the soul of their beloved, what was a death by a thousand cuts? What was a mangled body with crushed bones?

He gently rubbed the tip of his nose against Cheng Qian's neck, thinking to himself, *You've made me so mad in this life, that you'll have to be a beast of burden for me in the next one.*

Right when he was fancifully preparing for them to die as love martyrs, a bizarre true essence suddenly came up beside him like a divine army descending from the Heavens, adding a layer of body-protecting true essence to the both of them.

“...”

Wait a minute. Why was there someone else in this hellscape?

Despite it saving him, Sect Leader Yan had just been sunken too deep into his fantasies, and was a tiny bit annoyed at getting disturbed.

Fortunately, this inopportune ailment of his was not one that attacked his vitals. He reacted quickly, taking this precious bit of breath-catching time to harmonize his own disordered true essence. At the same time, he didn't neglect to cautiously probe this unexpected helping hand.

The body-protecting essence was divided into two layers inside. The inner layers closest to them was extraordinarily warm, like a quilt heated by the stove in winter, instantly penetrating his limbs and all his bones. The outer layer was extraordinarily cold, though, exactly as intense as the Site itself.

Who could have such extensive power?

Someone was heard to speak lightly into his ear. “Focus. You're a bit impatient. Your swordwill's aggressive nature is too strong and will incite the astral wind of this place; restrain it a little.”

He turned his head slightly. “Who...?”

The other didn’t answer, but a melody resounded from somewhere far away, getting closer.

The tune was elongated and relaxed, like weather turning warm without warning after a spring snow; the stagnant ice chunks inside a deteriorating lotus pond slowly melted, exposing a minute hint of the life hidden within the sludge, and the fish of the coming year brushed away the withered branches and dead leaves of the season prior, exposing glinting scales.

And so, millions of lotus leaves resembled the gently lifted skirt of a beauty slowly stretching out their body with grace, escorting a lotus flower washed with clean water...

He couldn’t tell what instrument that was, but felt his heart that had been unsettled because of Cheng Qian now settle a bit. The true essence of his whole body flowed steadily inside his inner sanctum for a few full laps. He took a deep breath, then became aware of his own mistake — he had been too concerned about Cheng Qian just then, and horribly provoked by the astral wind, that his swordwill had nearly dropped a realm.

He gradually gathered up his leaked-out sword qi, and the astral wind really did weaken by a lot in its wake. After not long, it cooled down again.

He lowered his head to adjust Cheng Qian’s position. “Thank you...” he said quietly, “My junior wasn’t doing too well. I might have had a moment of letting that hot-bloodedness get to my head.”

The music’s last lingering note dimmed, its ending tone now stopped. “It’s just a trifling curse,” the other said. “It can be resolved. No need to worry too much.”

Yan Zhengming gently pulled Cheng Qian's face up. Looking over it carefully in total worry for a short minute, he discovered that the black qi and weird, ear-shaped mark that had been between his brows were both gone. Apart from the fact that his body was getting hotter and hotter, there was no other abnormality to be seen.

Odd, he thought to himself. Looking at it like this, it doesn't seem like soul-painting.

"I wonder if your esteemed self could look and tell me what kind of curse is on him?" he tentatively asked.

"The Spring-Autumn Curse," the voice answered mildly. "You cultivators seem to call it 'soul-painting', which sounds very mighty. It's actually just a minor skill, though. Don't put it to mind."

Yan Zhengming raised a brow — what did they mean, 'you cultivators'? "Dare I ask who your honor is—"

"I am no such 'honor'," the voice answered breezily. As if unaccustomed to the polite manners of speech of humans, there was some rigidity in that breeziness. "I am only a flower spirit born along with the Golden Lotus."

As they spoke, a gray figure flashed before Yan Zhengming's eyes. It was vague, its age and gender unclear, and resembled an unremarkable moth within the harsh Da Xue Mountain and increasingly dazzling golden light; with the slightest bit of inattention, they would have been overlooked.

He slightly narrowed his eyes, unsure of how this spirit planned on dealing with them, the two intruders.

The spirit appeared to be able to tell what he was thinking, and got straight to the point. "Don't fret too much. The reason why I came out to protect you two was by order of the Lotus."

Yan Zhengming was caught off guard. Even though he was frequently conceited in his own excellence, he wasn't narcissistic enough to believe that flowers would bloom whenever they noticed him. Extreme vigilance arose within him. *This stupid flower isn't going to make us into fertilizer, right?*

"Today's Lotus Leaf bloomed because of you," the spirit said. "You naturally have the privilege to take it. Follow me."

"..."

The Lotus was inviting him to take its Leaf? It saw that he was about to get slapped to death by the Site, so it specially sent a spirit to protect them?

This was a daydream, right?

There was a saying: 'chasing after the customer is not sound business.' That wasn't even mentioning how he was used to always being unlucky; he firmly refused to believe that such bullshit luck could land upon his head.

Frowning, he tentatively asked, "That... is staggeringly flattering to *me*, let alone anyone else, but it was that preceding demonic cultivator that opened a hole in Da Xue, and their base is likely higher than mine. How could I be worthy?"

"That ghost cultivator's base is indeed higher, but he doesn't have the qualifications — because he's not a grandmaster of demons."

"...Excuse me. Neither am I."

"The great Lotus Leaf can wash off all sins of the human realm. It represents a rule in and of itself; it isn't that whoever has the higher base is the one that gets acknowledged. The one that it acknowledges is no discussion of righteous versus nefarious or demonhood, but must be able to

influence the situation and standards of one party. This is called ‘having influence’, and influence involves ‘power’. I can see that you’re a righteous cultivator. Perhaps you don’t have a particular area of excellence, yourself, but all the other great powers of your generation are dead, and that ‘power’ has fallen to you. That’s nothing shocking. Don’t be afraid.”

“...”

That sounded like he was a slightly better candidate picked out of a bunch of bad ones, but when he thought about it... it really seemed to be the case.

After Tong Ru’s death was the generation of the Four Sages. Now, with Shang Wan’nian’s passing and Bian Xu’s decline, the era of the Four had since gone. Within the demon-elimination move, both the Celestial Divination Bureau and Nightmare Travelers’ Nine Sages were defeated, and all the vital energies of the major sects had been hurt before the Ten-Party Array. This was truly an age where the mountain had no tigers, allowing him, a monkey, to be called king.

If nothing else, there was no way that them avoiding the death penalty for Han Yuan so easily had nothing to do with the rapid rise of the Fuyao Sect.

“That so-called Da Xue Mystic Site is actually just a protective barrier created by the Lotus itself in the Beiming Sea. Once it grows the Leaf, the Site falls apart in an incense stick’s worth of time, then waits once more for the next occasion of assembling beside the Lotus. You’d best move fast. Take the Leaf, then bring your junior away from here on your own. He’s only affected by minor soul-painting; with the Leaf, that can be broken with no more effort than it would take to blow away dust.”

Yan Zhengming got the general sense that this Leaf was a bit hard to believe in, so he had to ask, “Forgive my stupidity, but I need to ask more — what is meant by ‘washing by away all the sins of the world’? Let us say that someone has massacred the innocent, their sin heavy and deeds already

done. Could it be that as long as they have this Leaf, those that have died can live again?”

The spirit was startled by this question, then smiled after a moment. “Most of the people I’ve seen in the Site were demonic cultivators. As expected, you righteous ones don’t think alike... the dead cannot be resurrected, of course. The ‘sin’ I spoke of is not the same as what you’re thinking of. Since you’ve entered the Sword Spirit Realm, you presumably have already sensed the thing mysteriously fastened to all cultivators...”

“The path of Heaven,” Yan Zhengming answered.

“The path of Heaven has clearness, muddiness, liveliness, stillness, longness, shortness, thickness, and thinness. What is rigid then breaks, what is sturdy then falls. The path of Heaven makes demonic cultivators’ bases progress rapidly, and also makes them fond of killing and blood, believing it to be a balance. For the demonic path to become sacred, it must have never been tainted with blood all their life. The path of Heaven wants balance. Cultivators... this alleged ‘sin’ is also a way it balances. It causes cultivators to consider consequences and restrict their own behaviors with their own fears, so as not to end with divine tribulations at the ends of good and evil.”

During this speech, Yan Zhengming’s feet touched real ground. It seemed like he was near the Site’s outback; those overbearing astral winds had vanished at some unknown time.

In the wake of his true essence’s circulation, the wounds of all sizes on his body began to mend. He firmly held Cheng Qian, and did not proceed any further, standing where he was. “What you mean is that the Leaf sounds almighty, but in plain words, it’s a red apricot escaping guilt before tribulations?”

“Stemming from mud, remove its filth and take its cleanliness — if you insist upon saying it like that, then you’re not wrong.”

Yan Zhengming felt an indescribable conflict, that fatal magnetism from the Leaf diluting.

The spirit stood ten steps away from him. “The path of Heaven is not benevolent, taking all life as [straw dogs](#) — what is the difference between the righteous and evil, to the Great Dao? And yet, you mortals can’t see through that.”

Yan Zhengming simply wanted to sneer at that. If that were the truth, what significance would Han Yuan’s five hundred years of whipping have? Just stick a lotus leaf onto his forehead, and he would turn into a pure and guiltless little lamb on the spot!

Right then, he heard the sound of a plant breaking through the soil, after which an exotic aroma that was hard to put into words came through. The spirit raised their head slightly. “The Golden Lotus is blooming, the Leaf that can cloud the eyes also unfurling...”

Yan Zhengming was startled, looking up in the direction the spirit was facing to see a gold lotus no more than two fists big floating above the ground. Very close to the flower, that bizarre golden light actually wasn’t that strong, unspeakably sanctified; and yet, its roots were buried deep into the pitch-black Beiming Sea’s waters, giving a strong contrast.

So that was it... this site could extinguish all lights, including the natural night pearls, because the ice here had been made from that extremely dark Beiming water!

The lotus stood alone in a thin layer of seawater, a lingering layer of fog floating above it. As if it had felt an outsider’s breath, it suddenly and slowly twirled, revealing a palm-sized leaf hidden under it.

For some reason, as soon as he saw it, a certain reverence grew within him.

The spirit sighed quietly. “This is the heart of Da Xue... since it unfurled for you, cultivator, it is yours.”

Yan Zhengming didn’t move, though.

The spirit glanced at Cheng Qian. “The Leaf is as a flower that blooms at night; once fully unfurled, there is only an incense’s worth of time it has before it withers, and the Site collapses in its wake. This is a worldly treasure that all humans bust their heads open wanting; what are you still mulling over?!”

There was some insuppressible anxiety and entreaty in the spirit’s tone. Yan Zhengming was almost inspired to rebel from their urgency, thinking, *The Emperor isn’t in a rush, but the eunuch is. Where’s the reason in that?*

Noticing his wavering expression, the spirit immediately prescribed the right medicine. “You might be able to wait on the Leaf, but your junior’s soul-painting likely won’t, soon!”

Those words stuck right into his mortal acupoint. While he continuously approached the lotus, Cheng Qian’s fate grew paler, and by the time they got over there, the hair on his temples were already completely soaked through with cold sweat, and his fingers were unconsciously spasming into fists. His entire body was shaking, as if he was enduring immense pain.

“Are you planning to watch him mutilate himself to death in your arms in order to not kill you?”

Yan Zhengming finally couldn’t resist anymore. He set Cheng Qian down to let him lean against him, then freed up one hand so that it could reach out for the Golden Lotus Leaf that made every demonic cultivator alive go wild.

And at this critical moment, Cheng Qian woke up.

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Chapter 104

Surviving golden light flickered in Cheng Qian's eyes. He seemed to have snapped out of his immense pain, grabbing Yan Zhengming's outstretched hand without warning.

His entire body was still trembling. In addition to pain, an indescribable gloom tinged his features.

He shut his eyes. The next moment, Yan Zhengming abruptly unsheathed Shuang Ren for him from where it had been placed behind his back, then slashed a huge arc through the air at the nearby flower spirit, without lenience.

In this split second, the spirit had been wanting to dodge, but Shuang Ren was going at an extremely devious angle — if they dodged, that sword qi would inevitably effect the lotus.

Unable to avoid it, the spirit let out a loud shout. That bizarre cold-outside, hot-inside true essence instantly formed a barrier with them as the center.

It wasn't clear whether this barrier was a technique or made from an artifact, but could hold up against even the astral wind of Da Xue. Upon meeting Shuang Ren's swordwind, the crash sent a sky-shaking noise bouncing around Beiming's depths.

Da Xue Mountain made an unbearable groaning sound, and the astral wind that had since calmed down began to well up restlessly again.

With another look, no leaf was beneath the Golden Lotus at all — there was clearly a bald patch!

So, it had been an illusionary technique.

Shuang Ren staggered as it flew out. Cheng Qian reached out to pull it into his hand.

At the same exact time, the spirit drew back a few steps, the originally-gray figure seeming to sway unsteadily.

This unforeseen incident unfolded very quickly, practically overwhelmingly. Yan Zhengming and the spirit started speaking nearly simultaneously.

“Xiao Qian, what are you doing?” Yan Zhengming asked, completely bewildered.

“Are you insane?! The Golden Lotus is the heart of Beiming!” the spirit roared, furious.

“The heart of Beiming... what does that have to do with me?” Cheng Qian hoarsely answered. His expression did not look any sort of better, eyes like ink, staring dead at the indistinct figure of the spirit with a complexion as sunken as water. “Quit acting. I dug out the Ice-hearted Fire you wield in Zhaoyang myself.”

Wait... Ice-hearted Fire?

“You’re saying... that this is Tang Zhen?” Yan Zhengming asked.

As soon as the name ‘Tang Zhen’ was out, green veins bulged out of Cheng Qian’s hand that was holding Shuang Ren. The tip of the sword lightly brushed against the ground, producing a tooth-hurting scraping sound.

Yan Zhengming felt his head swelling. “What is actually going on with you? Was that soul-painting just now?”

“Soul-painting that was bestowed by Zhenren Tang. It’s been resolved now, though.” Cheng Qian turned to him; when his frigid and remote gaze landed upon Yan Zhengming, it finally softened up. He gazed at him deeply, then suddenly whispered. “Thank you, senior.”

There seemed to be millions of words in that look. Yan Zhengming completely did not understand the reason for them, reflexively waving his hand. “No... no need to thank me. Wait, all of this is a mess! You’re saying that this moth is Tang Zhen, and he placed soul-painting on you?”

“His real body is the Soul-Devouring Lamp. I’m guessing that he’s only moving his primordial spirit using a ghost body that’s frozen in the Site.” Cheng Qian slowly turned to the ‘flower spirit’. “Only the true owner of the Soul-Devouring Lamp can place their spiritual consciousness into one of the infinite ghosts of the Lamp — isn’t that right, Brother Tang?”

Since he had said as much, the ‘spirit’ went quiet for a moment, then suddenly chuckled, slowly becoming clear in midair.

Inside white mist, the form of a lifeless young woman first appeared, one glance at her complexion and dulled gaze telling that she was a ghost, after which her figure gradually stretched out, facial features slowly distorting like they were paste. After several changes, she finally became Tang Zhen.

Having been exposed by him, all of his plans had nearly fallen through at the last second, but as his shrewdness went extremely deep, he did not let any of his annoyance show through to his face. “The so-called path of the ghost was originally just the path of the soul,” he said with a smile, hands behind his back. “If someone who cultivates the path of the ghost can only command a bunch of ghosts to bite their enemies apart, what is the difference between keeping ghosts and keeping dogs? It’s rather too shoddy.”

Yan Zhengming hesitated for a moment. “You are the Lamp... so what is Jiang Peng?”

Tang Zhen glanced at the bare, leafless Golden Lotus. “Well, there’s no harm in chatting with you two here. The ghost path is a wide-reaching route; if the soul and primordial spirit can be refined, can a corporeal body not be? People are much too constrained to formalities.”

“You refined his body and soul together?” Yan Zhengming asked in astonishment.

“Incorrect. You’ve likely also heard that the ghost path is a form of the demonic path, Sect Leader Yan. One’s own hands cannot be stained with blood, else they’ll become a slave to murderous thoughts. I merely got close to him using our old acquaintance during his travels, then took this advantage to fan the flames. He was voluntarily refined by the Lamp, and now, he still believes that he’s the one controlling it.”

“Han Yuan said to me that the Bureau’s people had purposefully given him an alleged ghost cultivation method, and plotted for him to be drawn into the Lamp to become a ghost cultivator... It sounded strange to me at the time, because how could someone with strong vision like the Third Prince take a fancy to Jiang Peng’s aptitude? It was you the whole time,” Cheng Qian said coldly.

Even though Zhou Hanzheng had put Han Yuan under soul-painting way back when, that had been a personal grudge between them and him. At most, they held the Bureau that supported him in contempt. That was why when Wu Changtian later paid a visit, Yan Zhengming had only said that they would fight, not go about murdering him.

Had it not been for the blood debt of Jiang Peng’s murder of all of Han Yuan’s family, the latter would never have had such immense hatred for the

Bureau, nor have ever cultivated into a demonic dragon for the sake of revenge, thus inciting great chaos in Nanjiang.

“It was you that misguided Han Yuan,” Cheng Qian went on.

Tang Zheng smiled lightly. “From Tong Ru to Gu Yanxue, has the Bureau ever done anything good? Even if I hadn’t been adding fuel to the fire, inferior people like that ‘Third Prince’ go looking for their own deaths. How could they have lasted for such a long time?”

Yan Zhengming suddenly recalled that when the Western Palace’s Bai Ji went to Azure Dragon Island to cause trouble, he had been acting in the name of searching for his grandson, and someone had stood out and said that there were ghost cultivators on the island. He had thought that that had been a pretext found by those indecipherable people to pressure Gu Yanxue, but now, it seemed like...

“Our martial grandfather nearly destroyed your Lamp, so you were hiding out near Azure Dragon Island all that time!” he suddenly said.

Those words were without beginning and end, but all three of them understood what they heard.

Tang Zhen did not deny it. “I finely studied the path of the soul. Over a hundred years ago, I was ordered by my seniors to serve another Senior on Mulan Mountain who was dying. I was young and full of energy at the time; after accompanying him to the end of his life, I had the idea to use a newly-acquired secret technique to pry into the vestiges of his primordial spirit remaining in his body, and incidentally learned some of his memories. That Senior had been a plant in the Bureau... and they were mulling over how to get rid of Tong Ru, whose limelight was too strong.

“I got too curious. At right that time, when I had just finished my training, I was stuck at the primordial spirit hurdle and needed to go down the

mountain to gain experience. I gave notice to my sect, then brought one of my junior sisters with me to Fuyao to watch the excitement.”

“And you didn’t expect that by coincidence, you wouldn’t be watching the excitement, but becoming the excitement yourself when you cuckolded the Yao King,” Yan Zhengming picked up.

Tang Zhen brushed off his vulgarity with a smile. “Indeed. I didn’t expect that to happen, and never returned — for many years, I rummaged all through the world for tiny clues of the Golden Lotus Leaf, after which I learned that it had to eat ‘influence’ to be born. Only when it inhales the soul of one that has collected worldwide influence will its flower finally fall and leaves be visible. Had Gu Yanxue not died back then, that ‘influence’ would have fallen upon him as this world’s number-one, but because of that idiot Jiang Peng, I was injured by Tong Ru, and met with the Bureau a step too soon.”

“So, Jiang Peng always wanted to inherit Beiming,” Cheng Qian said. “He really dedicated himself in want to give you fertilizer.”

Tang Zhen turned to him. “He does have that obsession. Unfortunately, due to the limits of his aptitude, he has no karmic connection to the title ‘Lord Beiming’ at all. Then, by happenstance, I came across you, whose soul was in the Spirit-Collection Jade. Our two fates in life were really too similar, so I meddled in your business for a time. Yet, the worldly spiritual object that the Jade is was different from the Soul-Devouring Lamp; you actually managed to refine a physical body by enduring heavenly tribulations. Cheng Qian, in your form, I saw my own hope.”

Cheng Qian’s face was blank.

The other sighed. “Counting on Jiang Peng to be Beiming is too unrealistic. When you said to me in Mingming Valley that you were willing to tread through fire for me, I then plotted on guiding that ‘influence’ over to you.

Unexpectedly, after the Immortal Binding Platform, you didn't hesitate to injure yourself and couldn't bear to watch your senior brother die... tch. In the end, humanity's calculations are inferior to the Heavens'."

Yan Zhengming smiled fakely. "Ah. That's really unfair to you, for your latrine filled with flower fertilizer to accidentally get occupied."

Tang Zhen was unconcerned. "No need to say it's unfair. Astral wind covers this Site; since you've entered, you're not getting out without the protection of the Ice-hearted Fire. Do you want to be trapped here together with him, or will you obediently sacrifice your soul so that I happily retrieve the Leaf? I can guarantee that I will bring your precious junior out of here with all his pieces intact."

Cheng Qian stared at Tang Zhen with a complicated expression. Before Yan Zhengming could answer, he suddenly interjected, "Are you working so hard to get the Leaf for our junior sister? If you admit to that much, Tang Zhen, I'll forgive you."

Hearing this, steam came out of all of Yan Zhengming's orifices as he glared at Cheng Qian. *What? You promising to 'tread through fire' for someone else behind my back aside, he's set off so much crap! How could you randomly forgive him with one deceiving sentence?! There's no logic! This Tang guy has to have drugged you with some kind of enchanting potion!*

Tang Zhen also appeared to be a bit astonished, soon after which he smiled. "Yes. It's for her."

Cheng Qian stared into his eyes — only then could he see that within those eyes that always seemed to be as warm as spring, there had only been a pit of madness.

“Since it’s for her,” he enunciated, “then dare I ask what her name is, what year and month she was born on, and when the first time her yao form showed up and took to the skies was?”

Tang Zhen’s face was like a mask. He was not angry at getting seen through, constantly watching him with an impenetrable smile. “My young friend, let’s not pretend to affectionately beat around the bush. I will tell you the truth; only beings that are born in the morning and die by evening, like mortals and insects, will think about having generations of offspring. After achieving the Dao and ascending, the world will be unchanging, all the living things in it like one mass. What would it matter if any of them are related to you by blood?”

“Oh, I get it now. You want to use the Leaf to wash away the Lamp’s sins, pull through the heavenly tribulations, and ascend to immortality.”

“No. Enduring the tribulations would only refine my a half-immortal body like yours,” Tang Zhen earnestly corrected. “I want those millions of souls — do you remember what I told you before? With your current form, if you could spend your entire life purely cultivating beside that ice pool, you would have eternal life. Ghosts are to me what the cold qi of the ice pool is to you.”

The tribulation of millions of resentful ghosts had stemmed from Tong Ru. Who it would respond to was something everyone had countless guesses about.

Some had said that it would respond during the military calamity of Prince An’s armed rebellion, some had said that it would respond during the war calamity of the Nanjiang demonic dragon, and some had said that the Celestial Divination Bureau would reach too high...

No one had expected that it would respond to Tang Zhen.

Yan Zhengming suddenly remember that Li Yun had told him that people like Zhenren Muchun would have disturbances in their psyche after escaping from the Soul-Devouring Lamp. That was saying nothing about Tang Zhen... who had completely integrated with it.

The Lamp had long worn down his humanity. His sweetheart and beloved daughter he had once risked his life for were now likely no more than poorly-acquainted strangers to him.

“Eternal life...” A weird expression showed on Cheng Qian’s face, somewhere between mocking and bitterly smiling. He suddenly reached out to grab the lotus. “I’ll complete you. I’ll pick this Leaf and give you your eternal life—“

Yan Zhengming panicked. “Careful, don’t touch—“

Tang Zhen disapproved, thinking to say the ‘influence of the world’ did not belong to Cheng Qian, so he would not be luring the Leaf out — but, as soon as Cheng Qian reached over, the petals of the lotus all withered for reasons unknown, and a tiny, thumb-length leaf was seen majestically growing out of the lotus’s base!

In the midst of Tang Zhen’s shock, the Leaf furled up delicately — it didn’t get the time to open up, as Cheng Qian mercilessly plucked it off and gripped it in his hand.

And yet, the Golden Lotus could not devour his soul.

Chapter 105

“Impossible...” Tang Zhen’s pupils contracted. He suddenly recalled something. “That can’t be. How did you shake off the soul-painting?”

Cheng Qian smiled without sound. That grin held an indescribable implication inside it, a layer of unfamiliar weariness floating upon its surface, and a hidden feeling of difficulty that he forcibly suppressed beneath it.

Yan Zhengming was startled, but before he could react, the ground under his feet violently shook.

Right; since the Golden Lotus had wilted and the Leaf had been taken, Da Xue Mountain would inevitably collapse.

“So that’s why,” Cheng Qian whispered, holding the little Leaf. “If demonic cultivator come, this Leaf will only recognize the leader of many demons, then, right? No wonder the leader is also called ‘Lord Beiming’, with that implication. Tang Zhen, have you ever heard of any preceding case of a demonic cultivator ascending?”

Tang Zhen gave an arrogant and mocking smile. “Effort always begets results, little friend.”

When he said that, he vaguely resembled how he had when he had said his farewell to Tong Ru and descended Fuyao Mountain two hundred years ago.

Cheng Qian calmly looked at him. Gradually, all the wrath and iciness on his face faded away, and slightly inconspicuous self-mockery and grief floated up. He seemed to be looking at Tang Zhen, yet also seemed to be looking at something else through him.

His eyes were melancholy, and piteous.

The minute Cheng Qian ever started frowning, Yan Zhengming knew that he was going to start cussing something out. At this time, he wasn't sure if it was his misperception or what, but he got the overall feeling that he could see a bit of his own listlessness out of the other's eyes.

Cheng Qian apathetically raised the Leaf he held, then used his fingers to forcibly twirl open the not-yet-opened thing with no gentleness.

Tang Zhen's expression finally changed. He could no longer keep his airy demeanor up, eyes emitting the bloodied qi unique to demonic cultivation; vermilion red, and ferocious-looking. "Hold on. What are you doing?"

"How many troubles in this world have been born out of nothing because of you people's delusions?" Cheng Qian answered indifferently.

"No, you can't—"

The other suddenly clapped his palms together, and without the slightest bit of mercy, that Leaf was broken into bits at once.

Tang Zhen was stupefied in disbelief for a long time, then let out an inhuman shriek, charging at him in near insanity. He no longer took pains to conceal the sky-soaring demonic qi about himself, his entire form turning into a cloud of black fog.

Yan Zhengming actually really wanted to shriek, too — That was the Golden Lotus Leaf of Da Xue Mountain, a human-world treasure everyone had heard of before! The fucking thing was worth a lot of money!

And yet this wastrel, Cheng Qian, had just crushed it!

All these trashbags that didn't have mouths to feed were much too reckless!

However, the Site was constantly crumbling, there was a major devil of unknown power right in front of him, and Cheng Qian appeared to be extremely unstable, both physically and mentally. Despite wanting nothing more than to make him go kneel on a rolling pin for a month, Yan Zhengming had no choice right now but to pull Cheng Qian behind him and raise his sword to greet Tang Zhen.

A loud noise came from deep inside the Site. In the distance, the huge ice layer began to crack in large chunks.

Tang Zhen had nothing of his gentlemanly appearance left. His eyes were so red, they were nearly seeping blood, and black qi coiled about his face; clearly, demonic qi had tangled up with him long ago.

Still, as soon as they exchanged blows, Yan Zhengming's hand that held his sword was shocked numb by him. He couldn't help but be astonished — had Han Yuan never been qualified to inherit Beiming because he had no chance to defeat the previous Lord Beiming, or was it because of Tang Zhen?

And this wasn't even his real body, it was just a phantom!

Several other ghosts emerged out of nowhere, ice crystals from the Site on their bodies, and neatly lined up behind Tang Zhen.

Yan Zhengming didn't dare to be careless, using one hand to complete a hand seal and fully open the qi field of his source wooden sword. Overbearing sword qi paid no mind to the continuously-falling ice chunks around, pressing right in on Tang Zhen.

Right then, Shuang Ren was unsheathed with a *shing*, all of the frigid qi of the Site appeared to get stirred up by it. Taking advantage of Yan Zhengming stalling Tang Zhen, Cheng Qian flashed over like an apparition,

his sword's shadow slippery, one move of Subtlety appearing to be all-pervading, bisecting several of the ghosts behind Tang Zhen.

“Imp. You two are pushing too hard.” Tang Zhen’s face had turned ugly. His hundred-year arrangement had been shattered by Cheng Qian’s palms, making him nearly go mad, the repercussions of his primordial spirit having been locked up with the Soul-Devouring Lamp for such a long time exploding out without any sort of cushioning. “You really think that chunk of Wish-Granting Stone on Fuyao Mountain is set up nicely?”

He flicked out a sleeve, which collided with Yan Zhengming’s swordwind. The demonic qi rent to shreds by the sword qi seemed to have an even sharper edge. “And that you two alone would be able to kill me?”

Tang Zhen laughed aloud. “You destroyed the Leaf. I can wait for the next one, but will *you* be able to?”

What did that mean? Yan Zhengming’s thought quickly revolved, but he didn’t get to reason it out in time — the very next moment, the ghost that Tang Zhen occupied burst open without prior portent, its force no lesser than that of a normal cultivator that had blown up their own primordial spirit.

He ran away!

The teetering Site completely collapsed. Tumultuous waves crashed into the torn-open surface, Tang Zhen’s ghosts melting into Beiming’s waters before them. Yan Zhengming only had enough time to grab Cheng Qian, forcibly summon a barrier of body-protecting true essence, and then become submerged.

The pressure of the most demonically-aligned seawater in the world was too much for him to bear. His breathing stuttered as he had the momentary illusion that he was getting buried alive. Aside from how tightly he held

Cheng Qian, he seeming to be disconnected from all of his surroundings, unable to even feel the primordial spirit sword he had place elsewhere.

They somehow did not float up in the water. The unparalleled pressure of the ocean was like a palm with no give, pushing them to the bed of Beiming.

At the same time, Li Yun, a thousand li away, noticed the primordial spirit sword lightening in his hand. That glimmering sword qi flickered a few times, then dimmed down, as if it had lost its connection to its owner.

He startled, after which his face suddenly paled. “Something happened to our eldest!”

Shui Keng hadn’t yet recovered from the feather turning to ash in her hand. “What are you talking about, brother?! Don’t scare me!”

Li Yun, who had just been so glib-tongued, was now somewhat rambling. “This spirit sword... he left it to me, and I felt... the connection suddenly break—“

A piercing blast boomed through the air, cutting him off. Startling in fright, he looked up to see that Han Yuan and Jiang Peng had stayed their hands at the same time, each separating. The set-up of the array of those outside had been completed, and looked especially familiar — it was actually the exact same Demon Extermination Array as from the base of Tai Yin!

Black clouds rolled in the highest skies. The White Tiger disciples had never seen such a thing before, successively drawing back in disorientation, and then a massive sabre descended from the air, pointed directly at Han Yuan. He did not avoid it, tilting his head back to look at the sabrelight in the cloud cover with a sneer on his face, immediately after which he flew up to meet it.

This isn't right! Li Yun thought, throat dry. Doesn't Bian Xu know that the Bureau already used this Array against Han Yuan before? Has he actually gone stupid in his age? Why is he doing the same old trick?

Jiang Peng had suddenly lost his opponent, looking up at the big sword in the air. For some reason, he didn't give chase for an attack.

With but a crisp sound, the Demon Extermination Sabre formed of black clouds met the demonic dragon. Sabrewind was all-encompassing, paring flat the summit of the mountain closest to the two of them in an instant. Wind and thunder surged. Delicate sparks burst out of the dragon's scales, stretching out like a string of fireworks beneath the sabrewind.

Han Yuan grinned while in the ninth firmament. "There's more than one spot in the world where a primordial spirit sword can lose connection with its owner. Your eldest might have bored himself into some mouse hole, Li Yun. What are you overblowing this for?"

Li Yun's brows jumped up as he sharply gleaned something out of his tone.

"Scourges last for a thousand years. Who in this world is more of a scourge than him?" Han Yuan continued. "As I see it, you shouldn't have baseless fears."

Li Yun raised his head, only for that sabrelight to be so blinding, he couldn't open his eyes. He wanted to ask the coiling demonic dragon in the sky: *With that positive tone of yours, are you merely comforting yourself, or did you actually see clues in the Three-Life Mystic Site?*

What had Han Yuan seen there, that day outside the Ten-Party Platform?

However, he was not given time to speak. There was a circle outside the Demon Extermination Array; the huge banner of Black Tortoise Hall rose

up to face the wind, billowing, and in the array's eye, a group headed by Bian Xu walked on over.

Jiang Peng, the originally-frenzied Soul-Devouring Lamp, seemed to have suddenly been switched out for a different person. He stood there quietly, thin face constantly getting off-and-on illuminated by the Array's sabrelight. "Alas, this Hall Master of Black Tortoise..." he mumbled, "with a heart like that, it's little wonder that he's gotten so old, and yet the 'influence' of the world refuses to land upon him."

The demonic dragon had the sabre of the Array supported on his shoulder. Slightly narrowing his eyes, he looked at Bian Xu.

The White Tiger elder wasn't about to wait for him to talk, jumping out and charging ahead on his own initiative to point at Bian Xu's nose and curse at him. "What is the meaning of this? The majestic Black Tortoise Hall, taking the lead in rebellion?! You're worse than that gaggle of raggedy demons!"

Upon hearing that indiscriminate attack, the dragon in the sky puffed angrily through his nose.

"That pledge was set between the White Tiger Estate and the Fuyao Sect. I didn't agree to it," Bian Xu said coldly. "The face of your Estate changes like the pages of a book. As soon as Estate Lord Shang learned that his life was almost up, he immediately found a great backer for you all, really sparing no effort for you... why don't I see that backer, Sect Leader Yan?"

The elder stamped his foot. "You're practically qi deviating!"

Bian Xu looked calm. "My only son is dead, my mental realm is stagnant, and there's no way for my cultivation base to advance further in this life of mine. My immediate lifespan is no more than a decade or two. This is what the grand Four Sages are... now, I have nothing. What would I be afraid of?"

Han Yuan turned into human form and crossed his arms, dropped down a bit from the air. “You blaming me?”

The White Tiger elder glared at the shit-stirring stick that was the demonic dragon. “Homicide should be repaid with life. Brother Bian, this dragon won’t be able to atone for his sins even with a death from a thousand cuts, but the chaos of Nanjiang needs him to clean it up. Your Hall has always been benevolent in regards to working for the welfare of the people...”

“The welfare of the people?” Bian Xu lightly laughed. “When my son was murdered, why didn’t you think about our Hall being the head of a party? Why didn’t you bring up anyone’s welfare?”

The elder choked on his words.

Bian Xu did not give him another chance to speak. “Kill the demonic dragon! I will handle these demonic cultivators!”

With that, he waited for no one, slashing straight into the Array and charging at Han Yuan. The latter, of course, was no pacifist, but right as he went to fight back, the oath mark on the back of his hand suddenly flashed, and the black clouds in the sky began to curl like a warning; the Array started to stir.

He inwardly cursed, flipping around in midair. White Tiger Estate’s crowd promptly came up to greet this. The clear-headed that had just flitted past Jiang Peng’s face vanished yet again, as if someone the had been temporarily affixed to him had now flown off. Giving off a bizarre shout, the word ‘Beiming’ was the only thing in his eyes once more, countless ghosts following him to block Han Yuan’s path.

Righteous against righteous, demonic against demonic. This fight was beyond chaotic, making it impossible to tell who was who.

Then, a minor zinging sound came from all around as something appeared to flash past the Array's rim; if one had had the slightest bit of inattention, it would have been covered up by the cacophony. Others hadn't heard it, but Shui Keng had, and though she had no clue at all what it was, her feathers instantly puffed out.

Opening her eyes wide, she happened to see Han Yuan no longer be able to keep his awful temper in check, and risk suffering lightning backlash to slap the aged Bian Xu away.

The other was struck ten or so zhang away by the enraged devil, immediately spitting out blood. Yet, something weird happened — the blood-oath sigil on the back of Han Yuan's had actually didn't backlash.

That meant... what?

Could it be that in such a short timespan, Bian Xu had qi deviated, and was no longer protected by the oath?

Startled for a moment, Han Yuan then looked up at Bian Xu in confusion. "What did you do?"

Bian Xu slowly wiped the corners of his mouth off. His face was withering up at a visible rate. Dense wrinkles crawled up the corners of his eyes like an invisible knife was carving them out. Bloody light flashed in his eyes, a ring of bizarre charms floating around his body like totems.

"What in the world is that?" the White Tiger elder muttered.

Han Yuan didn't make a sound, tightly clenching the heavy sword he held.

The next moment, Bian Xu was seen to suddenly spread his arms out and raise them. The majority of his grayed hair resembled dead flowers, falling

out in chunks, and his voice was as hoarse as a cuckoo crowing blood as he looked up at the sky and roared, “Emperor of the Sky...”

With those words said, Li Yun’s hairs stood on end. “He’s performing Sacrifice?”

Sacrifice was one of the most malevolent curses, where mortals could use the technique to kill someone intangibly. The power of this curse had been handed down through generations, so of course one of the former Four Sages would have it.

However, once this technique was completed, his physical form, three hun and seven po, descendants, and family foundation would all completely vanish.

“He’s using Sacrifice over his worthless, bastard son?!” the elder snarled incredulously. “He would so far?!”

No...

A cultivator’s lifespan was long enough, and consanguinity with children was thin. As long as he wanted to, couldn’t he just be born again? As the prestigious Black Tortoise Hall Master, there were countless people that would be willing to commit themselves to him.

He was doing this for his lifetime of past glory, while today’s Hall was on the decline.

Once his fate had left its port, no one revered him, and he couldn’t even incur the justice he wanted for his murdered relations.

He was firmly trapped in the past and the present, crushed to death within his decline from the peak.

Was the one he hated most really Han Yuan, his son-killing enemy?

Or was Han Yuan just his excuse?

There was no way for any of that to be verified right now.

Han Yuan charged at Bian Xu at once, attempting to interrupt him before he could implement Sacrifice, but then a black shadow pounced over in the air. Jiang Peng came out of the Lamp to bar his way, and in the span of a breath the black dragon sword had already collided with the ghost four times.

Han Yuan's expression suddenly twisted up, and he turned to look at Jiang Peng. "You're not Jiang Peng! Who are you?!"

A bizarre grin appeared on the other's face. "Who am I? You won't guess it even if you die..."

Bian Xu was not influenced by them at all, making a worshipping stance. "Empress of the Earth!"

"What are you all staring blankly for?! Stop him!" Li Yun shouted.

You Liang's primordial spirit swords abruptly converged into a cluster, which shot at Bian Xu. Gripping the completely-grayed sparrow feather, Shui Keng grit her teeth and revealed her Red Crane form — wrapped in the True Fire, she swept towards the group of ghosts to open up a path on the swordlight's behalf.

'Jiang Peng' laughed quietly, making Han Yuan's hairs stand on end.

Han Yuan blocked Shui Keng, accurately grabbed her long bird neck, then tossed her behind him. Right then, an immense sound blasted through the air as a ghost suddenly blew itself up. The six White Tiger disciples surrounding it didn't have time to dodge, instantly exploded into pieces.

‘Jiang Peng’ raised his head with a smile, looked at Han Yuan, and mouthed the word ‘bang’.

Han Yuan turned into the dragon, that demonic qi that originally terrorized people forming a protective barrier that engulfed everyone.

The ghosts then successively self-destructed in midair, the sound like thunder, much sharper than the blades of the tactless Demon Extermination Array. After such a short moment, Han Yuan was no longer able to sustain his magic dragon form, reverting to a human and falling from the sky like a broken kite.

His panlong robes were soaked in blood. Now, he actually had become ‘raggedy’, to quote the Whiter Tiger elder.

Expression overcast, he waved off Shui Keng’s hand that went to help him up, barely managing to stand up while supporting himself on his sword.

Shuzhong’s thousands of mountains suddenly began to quake incessantly together. Bian Xu’s form rose into the air like mad as he shouted, “My flesh —“

His old skinsack burst like a torn-open bag, turning his entire body into a mangle skeleton that showcased crimson musculature and eerie white bones, like a corpse being skinned alive.

And yet, he went on without regard. “Primordial spirit—“

That meat-only corpse burst. An orb of light resembling a cultivator’s sanctum of immortality lightly surged up, Bian Xu’s primordial spirit seated within it, encased in dense, bloodied qi.

Bian Xu could no longer speak using a mouth, a bellow like a vast bell bubbling out from the suspended, uncovered inner sanctum. “And soul!”

With that said, Sacrifice was completed. The phantom image of the Soul-Devouring Lamp suddenly vanished, and the group of ghosts suddenly flew off in different directions like swallows. Bian Xu's midair inner estate sharply contracted into a dot, then detonated.

When Gu Yanxue died, the East Sea had been turbulent for one day and night. In his life before, Bian Xu had been quite unknown amongst the Four Sages, but the aftermath of his death was more world-shaking than any other's.

All of Shu branched off of this location. This invisible attack rushed out in all directions at a rapid velocity.

Mountains collapsed. Not a single bird, beast, bug, or fish had time to escape. Villages seemed to get wiped off the face of the earth. This entire stretch of land was immersed within boundless darkness, fresh resentful souls rising up all over the place, and the phantom of the Lamp showed back up on the horizon like it was welcoming a full feast.

No sun nor moon could be seen. It was as if the only thing left was the Lamp rife with evil, inhaling ghosts from every direction non-stop.

Han Yuan's pupil's violently contracted.

He would not deny his own massacres. Innumerable cultivators had died by his hands outside of Vermillion Bird Tower. He understood that if his life was forfeited right now, it would be a result of his crimes.

But it was cultivators that planted causes to receive their effects. Why did the innocent mortals living here have to suffer such a fate?

Those faces that were getting sucked into the Lamp swept past him, one by one. His pupils had nearly shrunk to pinpoints.

The cause that Tong Ru had once planted was finally responding in such a brutal way.

Jiang Peng, who had been trying to obstruct Han Yuan, spread out his arms, smiling like his wish had been granted. He was bathed in slaughter that could not be described. Arms open, he allowed Bian Xu's forbidden technique to bowl over him.

His body fell to pieces like a walking corpse's, revealing a specter-like figure together with the Soul-Subduing Lamp.

Shui Keng covered her mouth when he recognized who the spirit was.

Soon after, the rolling forbidden technique came over to crush them. Han Yuan frantically shoved Shui Keng far away, then took up his dragon form once more, roaring. His body stretched out like a million-li-long mountain ridge or city wall, twisted into a huge circle where he was, end connected to end, in an attempt to forcibly stop the onslaught with his own flesh.

Tang Zhen's eyes within the Soul-Devouring Lamp met his. The former chuckled, shaking his head.

Then, he reached out a hand to make a claw. A claw composed of ghosts swept down from the air, directly sticking itself into the body of the demonic dragon.

—

Chapter 106

What flowed in the Sea of Beiming was not so much water as it was a whole world, where the clear and turbid were in stark divide.

When boats were on the water's surface, they could still float. Once a human got inside it, there would seem to be a relentless palm pressing down on the top of their head.

Almighty cultivators were still not tortoise spirits. They could endure for about half a month, but if pressed under the water for years, even gold inlaid with jade would get soggy, to say nothing of flesh and blood bodies.

The water surrounding them was as silent as death, seemingly unmoving. Only when one presumptuously attempted to fight the might of Beiming would they be met with a lesson as heavy as a mountain.

Yan Zhengming had repeatedly tried to use his sword qi to forcibly break away from the pressure on their heads, but it felt like he was an ant trying to shake a tree.

As a mortal — even on that had already entered Sword Spirit Realm — he was still just an ant before the Sea of Beiming.

Cheng Qian's confrontation with Tang Zhen appeared to have used up all of his mental energy. Right now, there was some listlessness in his eyes that had nowhere to settle. Even though he was allowed to do what he wanted and pull him wherever he wanted to go, Yan Zhengming got the general feeling that... if he let go, Cheng Qian would eventually dissolve in the seawater, offering no objection even if he drowned and became a floating corpse.

Having been scared half to death by him before this, and unclear on if that soul-painting had been cleared out, Yan Zhengming dared not excite him any further, nor expect him to have any suggestions of use. Still, their environs were too quiet; he couldn't resist breaking the silence by cautiously teasing Cheng Qian. "Being a love martyr really sounds fancy, but I'm the prodigy of a generation! I can't be quietly martyred like this!"

Hearing this, Cheng Qian finally had something of a response. His eyes slightly moved, the corners of his mouth slightly upticking.

Catching that slight reaction, Yan Zhengming quickly followed up. "Hey, you said that Tang Zhen is the Soul-Devouring Lamp, so doesn't that mean that all the ghosts in the world are dispatched by him alone, and as long as he wants to, he can attach himself to whoever, then travel a thousand li in the blink of an eye?"

He had just been casually lamenting, but as soon as he said as much, he abruptly became aware of the seriousness of this situation. Frowning, he started talking to himself before Cheng Qian could answer. "I just remembered... so, when he was in front of the Ten-Party Array, his constant attempts to get Han Yuan locked up on Fuyao Mountain wasn't to flaunt my reputation, but out of concern that Han Yuan actually would have a change of heart and tidy up the chaos of Nanjiang's Nightmare Travelers, right? He just said that he was hustling a million resentful ghosts over. Where there is chaos, there will be death; he only fears a world not in chaos."

In the wake of his voice, Cheng Qian's unfocused eyes slightly honed in.

"Tell me. Since he couldn't get the Golden Lotus Leaf from here, would his next step be to find Han Yuan and them to cause trouble? Copper Coin, what's wrong with you? Are you just going to ignore me? You're giving me heart problems!"

Cheng Qian slightly shut his eyes, bowed his head to press his forehead against the other's shoulder, then hugged him tight with both arms, as if he was a frozen beast that wanted to draw out some warmth from him.

He was cold by nature, not too willing to be intimate with others. Every once in a while, Yan Zhengming would want to try being icky-sticky, but after not even three sentences of stickiness, the other would inevitably get annoyed. Rarely was he ever like this.

Yan Zhengming was overwhelmed with this favor at first, after which he carefully softened up her voice. "What's wrong? Do... you feel upset because of Tang Zhen? Or are there aftereffects of the soul-painting—"

"It's not because of him. Senior, do you know anything about Hear the Universe?" With his face buried in his shoulder, Cheng Qian's voice sounded muffled. "The Third Prince had said 'You've all been swindled by Hear the Universe'. The thing he was talking about... is in me."

That ear-like mark?

Yan Zhengming was taken aback. "What's Hear the Universe?"

"An inheritance. A..." Cheng Qian's latter words trailed off on their own. He opened his mouth several times in an attempt to use different terms to expose some clues, but he was bound by a power he could not resist, originating from somewhere unseen, that prevented him from saying a single word. His fingers fiercely wrung Yan Zhengming's clothes, as he felt like those words were about to explode out of his chest.

Once your primordial spirit is fixed, and the inheritance I've sealed is accepted, you will understand that the inheritance has restrictions, and no one will be able to speak of the secrets of Hear the Universe... including the dead.

He hated that he could not let out a loud roar. He had finally been elucidated on how the Demon Elimination Seal that let the Celestial Divination Bureau control the major sects came to be, finally learned what that ‘Ten-Party Pledge’ was, finally understood why Shang Wan’nian had to make him fully fix his primordial spirit before he could accept the inheritance, and finally understood why the majestic White Tiger Estate Lord had constantly avoided the people of the world, living his life as an old madman...

Yet, those secrets were within Hear the Universe’s prohibition, all shut up within his mind. He would have to protect them, in fear and solitude, for the rest of his life.

Yan Zhengming couldn’t understand at first, but then suddenly seemed to sense something. Reaching out to place his hand on Cheng Qian’s chest, he proceeded to furrow his brow. “This is... a silencing prohibition?”

What actually was that ear-shaped sigil? Why had it been able to undo soul-painting? And why had it let Cheng Qian pluck the Leaf without consequence?

Uncountable suspicions rolled about in Yan Zhengming’s heart, but since Cheng Qian couldn’t talk, he had to swallow the total sum of his questions back down, then gently pat him on the back, fearing that he would add to his suffocation.

Taking a deep breath, Cheng Qian managed to settle himself and feign relaxation. “Since it won’t let me talk, I won’t bring it up. Tang Zhen... I’m guessing he’s not going to give up. Since he said that the millions of resentful souls will react to him, he must have had something set up. Han Yuan might not be able to beat him, but he also might not lose to him.”

“Regardless, we need to get out of here, first. Beiming is like a sea of death. If we keep sinking like this, we might actually sink to the eighteenth layer

of the netherworld.”

“Sea of death...” Cheng Qian quietly repeated. Suddenly, he recalled something, placing his hand on Shuang Ren from where it was on his waist. After shutting his eyes in contemplation for a moment, he let Yan Zhengming go, sending out a band of swordwill with a wave of his hand.

Yan Zhengming’s eyes brightened. That was a move out of Return to Trueness in Fuyao Wooden Sword, ‘A Withered Tree Meets Spring’.

This move created life in dead places, making it extremely fitting for this place. Before Yan Zhengming could praise that response for being very witty, though, he saw faint sword qi float out from Shuang Ren; it was gentle, but its wielder’s mood was unfortunately unsteady. The swordwill failed to fully integrate, quickly dissolving into the seawater, then quickly dying, not a trace left behind of it.

Cheng Qian tch’ed, lightly frowning. Right when he was about to try again, Yan Zhengming caught his wrist.

“A Withered Tree Meets Spring says that the path of Heaven leaves behind a ray of vitality for all living things. With this one, two can be made. Two can then bear three, and after the three, comes all.”

Cheng Qian couldn’t speak, but the frustration and stagnation in his swordwill couldn’t deceive anyone, especially not sword cultivators.

Yan Zhengming watched him sternly for a time. “But why does the will in your sword only have deadness and desolation? What were you thinking of just now?”

The other stared blankly, unable to explain.

With a heavy look, Yan Zhengming grabbed Cheng Qian's hand that held Shuang Ren. "Take a look."

Unfamiliar sword qi passed through their overlapping hands and went into Shuang Ren. Yan Zhengming's entirely distinct true essence instantly wiped away practically all of that thin frost on the vicious sword that never melted, revealing its originally-shiny body.

Soon after, elongated sword qi curled out from it, rotating in circles to stir up the seawater in front of them. Shuang Ren hummed as it vibrated violently. The formerly-stagnant Beiming water rushed forth in a huge splash — first forming a straight line, then exploding right there, shooting out in every direction.

The surrounding water was getting consistently whisked up, one revolution turning into ten, ten revolutions turning to a hundred as it boiled in their wake. A puff of flowers from withered wood, bloomed out of nothing, appeared to grow themselves out of a crack, its life force exuberant, spreading to the sea's domain in a wink.

The next instant, the buoyancy they had lost beneath Beiming congregated once again, and they quickly stopped sinking.

Yan Zhengming still didn't let go of Cheng Qian's hand, staring him dead in the eyes. "*This is A Withered Tree Meets Spring*. Do you need me to teach you it again on our Master's behalf? You're going to half-kill me by being a stubborn mule again! Just wait for me to sort you out!"

Cheng Qian didn't get the time to admit his fault, shouting, "Watch out!"

A loud noise was heard. The stirred-up water swelled, as if to crush them to death within itself — in danger, Cheng Qian's general lack of energy finally disappeared, and he set off body-protecting true essence as quick as he possibly could. Even with it, they got knocked around.

They then floated upwards at an extremely abnormal rate, picking up speed. The water around them was already a ball of chaos. For a second, neither dared to open their eyes.

It was unknown how long they were ‘flying’ through the water. What was around them suddenly lightened up. After a sharp buzz, they pierced right out of Beiming’s surface using the sword qi, breaking free of the water.

Yan Zhengming had had quite enough of the Sea’s hardships. The second he got out, he brought out the wooden sword, not wanting to remain in this evil ocean at all. After pulling Cheng Qian out, he flew out like a lightning bolt. “Come on! We’re leaving!”

That abyss and sea walls, once raised to the surface due to the Mystic Site, had been flattened from the blow-up. Neither of them dared to take a boat as relaxedly as they had come, flying on their swords a thousand li out in one breath.

Only then did Cheng Qian find a chance to speak. “Wait until this is all over to sort me out, okay? — Do you think Tang Zhen is going to go straight for Han Yuan?”

“When we just entered the Site, I felt Li Yun touch the primordial spirit sword I had left for him before we left. You know how he is; he would never touch anything life-saving unless on the brink of death... once we leave the sea, I’ll probably be able to sense the direction that sword is in. You’re coming with me to look, right?”

After all that stimulation, Cheng Qian was finally incrementally recovering his lost vitality, just like how he had when leaving the ice pool back in the day.

“Where are you going to find the time for that, then?” he asked. “You can’t be like Tang Zhen. As long as ghosts exist, his primordial spirit can dart

from horizon to horizon at any time. By the time we fly over there, we'll probably be too late. On top of that, if we kill a bunch of ghosts, he'll just be able to make new ones. That's useless."

"What you're saying is that we're just going to knock the pot over by directly going for the Soul-Devouring Lamp? Do you have an idea, then?"

"I'm thinking. Don't rush me."

"Hold on, careful!" Yan Zhengming made his sword do a sharp turn in the air without warning, grabbing Cheng Qian's shoulder. Shuang Ren let out a shriek, the two of them coming to a halt at the same time.

Following his line of sight, Cheng Qian saw that there was a gray ghost floating not far from them. He was gripping a milky-white halo, waiting for them while suspended in midair.

"Is that one of Tang Zhen's ghosts?" Yan Zhengming asked. "Is he waiting here to see whether we're dead or not for his Master?"

Cheng Qian didn't say anything, going towards the halo on his sword.

Yan Zhengming swiftly caught up. "Slow down, slow down! These ghosts self-destructing is no lesser in value than normal cultivators self-destructing their primordial spirits... what? How is it him?"

Cheng Qian looked solemn. "Liu Lang?"

This ghost was the youth that had always been following Tang Zhen, Liu Lang!

Back when Liu Lang had been possessed by Jiang Peng and about to die, Cheng Qian had used his own true essence to nail his three hun and seven po to his corporeal form, and had also entrusted Nian Dada with bringing

him to Tang Zhen, who was proficient in the path of the soul, to save his life.

Tang Zhen had given him a life of struggling at death's door, and Liu Lang, out of gratitude for his life-saving grace, had been at his beck and call this whole time devoted serving him, acting as his Daoling, all despite the fact that he had actually had the same chance to remain on Fuyao Mountain as Nian Dada did...

“Isn’t this kid...? Tang Zhen is beyond cruel!” Yan Zhengming shouted, losing his voice.

Cheng Qian tore a chunk of cloth off of himself. Using Shuang Ren as a knife, he carved out a precise heart-purging charm, then slapped it onto ghost-Liu Lang’s chest.

This charm could not be mentioned in the same breath as the wrong, half-finished product he had made a hundred years prior. The second it sank into Liu Lang’s body, the boy’s eyes cleared up, and even the gray aura about his face cleared up by a lot, as if he had awoken from a nightmare. He stared fixedly at Cheng Qian for a short time. “Senior Cheng.”

“Tang Zhen didn’t let even you go?” Cheng Qian rapidly asked. “Do you know where the Lamp is? Your soul shouldn’t be completely refined yet. If you bring us there quickly, you might be able to be freed before it’s too late —“

Liu Lang laughed a little. “Senior, it *is* too late.”

He raised up the light he held, and the ring flew to Cheng Qian like a bird returning to its nest. Before it got close, he felt for it — this was the true essence he had affixed to Liu Lang.

“It was solely from relying on your nail on my soul that I could escape, Senior,” Liu Lang went on, “and it led me here. I was afraid that I wouldn’t be able to wait for you, but the Heavens have had mercy by allowing me to maintain myself until now so that I can return it to its former owner.”

The true essence sank right into Cheng Qian’s palm. Simultaneously, Liu Lang’s soul was darkening and lightening in turn, looking like it was on the verge of scattering.

“The Lamp’s form is hidden in the piece of Ice-hearted Fire on Fuyao Mountain. He split the Fire you had taken into two; one section was placed into the snowy mountain, and the other was left in Fuyao. The Fire can isolate all spiritual consciousnesses. Even with all of Fuyao right under Sect Leader Yan’s eyes, you might not be able to feel that it’s there.”

Finished, Liu Lang’s entire body had since faded into an afterimage. Cheng Qian instinctively reached out to grab it, but only caught a handful of empty air with some seabreeze. The youth silently vanished, rose up between the sky and the earth, then was no more.

The two exchanged a look, and they flew on their swords like meteors towards Fuyao Mountain.

I sealed up the mountain for him, Yan Zhengming thought to himself, but I actually did the whole family a favor.

They traversed the Extreme North’s ice fields, once again passing Black Tortoise Hall and disturbing the bell above it as they flew. This time, though, no one came out to investigate.

The Hall was akin to an immense shadow, seated like something dead amidst infinite li of white snow, so silent, it was like no one lived there. One of its worn banners flew lonesomely in the air, shivering with the cold.

“What’s going on?” Yan Zhengming asked.

Cheng Qian swept his eyes over. “Bian Xu is dead.”

Right after he said that, he suddenly drew Shuang Ren, then sent Gazing Tide down upon the Hall. A current of black, sky-surging qi viciously rose up, then got cut apart by Shuang Ren, twisting and writhing in midair as it seemed to scream, then dissipate into smoke unwillingly.

Yan Zhengming was dumbstruck. “Was that a heart demon given form?”

“I’m guessing that either Han Yuan killed him, or he qi deviated and did something stupid... either situation is a real headache.”

They practically turned into shooting stars inside this world of snow.

At that same moment, back in Shuzhong, Tang Zhen took in a deep breath. The seemingly-impervious scales of the arrogant demonic dragon were exceedingly fragile beneath his palm, looking like they couldn’t withstand a single blow.

Everything before him was suffused with blood red, temporarily blurring even his line of sight.

The moment he saw blood, all of his various, carefully-considered calculations vanished like ash in the wind. He hallucinated that he held unmatched authority, felt that he had power beyond compare.

This was demonism. There was nowhere he could not waltz through in the Heavens or on the earth. No rules whatsoever could bind him. Everything alive was like ants crawling beneath his feet.

He was the perfected expert of the ghost path, all ghosts were part of his psyche, he alone headed an impressive army...

The Golden Lotus Leaf was destroyed, but couldn't he just wait for next time?

Who in the world today could still be his match?

His heart swelled without bounds, finally snared by the instincts of the demonic path. With blood seen, to say nothing of him, but even Han Yuan, and Tong Ru... not a one of them could control themselves.

The demonic dragon was covered in bloody fog from having suffered two heavy hits, but still refused to withdraw. Tang Zhen looked down upon them. "Don't you feel yourself to be ridiculous? The effect of a million resentful souls will be heading for me now. Heaven's will is coming back to its original owner. Even if you stop me here, it will be a futile search for death. Why bother?"

Even at a plight like this, Han Yuan still had a dirty mouth born from seeing others being smug, grinning maliciously. "I often hear the words 'upholding justice on Heaven's behalf' hanging off the lips of people from righteous sects, and every once in a while, I get secondhand embarrassment for them. I had never expected that there would be a marvel like you in our divine demonic path, Brother Tang, that would mouth the words 'Heaven's will'. Which seat is your ass actually on?"

Tang Zhen's giant claw was now half-sunken into his body. Han Yuan panted a few times, stubbornly maintaining his dragon form, his mouth still unwilling to spare him. "You... hh... new here? I'll just have to let you know... that we of the wayward path saying 'Heaven' like that a-all day long... is what's ridiculous!"

Tang Zhen laughed powerlessly. "You really won't cry until you see your own coffin, will you?"

Han Yuan bellowed angrily, his entire dragon form pushed to its limits. His flesh and blood seemed to boiling, making him let out a pained growl, but he grit his teeth and bore it. All his life seemed to be uninhibited and fluctuating; in reality, it was all him going with the flow, not able to help himself in the least.

Whenever it came time to move forward, he would instead retreat. Whenever it came time to restrain himself, he would instead unrestrainedly advance before he should.

All these years, he had either painfully advanced on the wrong path, or painfully regretted on the wrong path.

Perhaps some only learned how to retreat and advance appropriately in desperate situations, requiring a great deal of wits and perseverance.

“The path of Heaven...” he mumbled, “Our Fuyao Sect, since ancient times, has only walked the path of humanity. What do those dogshit gods have to do with us?”

All of a sudden, Shui Keng turned into a Red Crane, then charged at Tang Zhen with no regard for her own safety. She opened her mouth, but wasn’t sure what to call him; ‘cuckold’ seemed to be an insult to her own self, and ‘dad’ was something she felt him unworthy of.

So, she simply spat out a mouthful of True Fire, burning up the ghosts that were grabbing Han Yuan’s body.

“Shui Keng, get back here!” Li Yun shouted.

“Get away!” Han Yuan raged. “This is a grudge between us devils! What do you think you’re doing, you fat mynah?!”

“You’re fat! Your whole family’s fat!” Shui Keng answered, crying.

Tang Zhen expressionlessly turned to her. The ghosts again congregated into a hand heavy with deathly qi, then grabbed at her wing.

She dexterously glided away in the air, cloaked in fierce flames. Like a fenghuang making her way through, the bouncing fire singing countless hovering ghosts. “I’m not a calamity born in a bath of blood!” she yelled at him. “One day, I’m going to be the most powerful Yao King in the world! I was born a Red Crane — with no father!”

The corner of Tang Zhen’s eye twitched. The big claw made of ghosts abruptly disappeared, then re-formed behind Shui Keng without her knowing.

“Look out!” Li Yun called.

The enormous hand nabbed the Crane’s slender neck. Shui Keng fought desperately, her fire-red feathers floating downwards as they came off. Seeing such, a moment of hesitation flashed past Tang Zhen’s indifferent face, but ice-cold murderousness concealed it soon after.

Right then, a messy-looking bird of unknown species charged forth without fear of death. A wooden tablet grasped in its beak was spat out, then fastened upon Shui Keng — It exploded with a dazzling white light, knocking Tang Zhen away.

That was the puppet charm that Tang Zhen himself had drawn two hundred years ago. The Yao Empress had been reluctant to use it unto her death, but now, it was returned to its original owner.

The bird fluttered past, stammering out, “E-Empress’s egg, r-run quick—gkk!”

It got nailed to the ground by its chest from a ghost that had transformed into an awl, struggled pitifully a few times, and died.

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Chapter 107

These idiotic yao cultivators. The brains of their real bodies were only the size of a bean, and there would only be one thing that they could pack into them in their lifetimes.

They weren't like humans, where love and hate filled the chest up full, everything ever-changing never enough to make use of. A heart could never be idle, as once it was, it would morph, becoming entirely different in the blink of an eye.

Han Yuan's demonic dragon body was pushed to its limit by Bian Xu's incessantly-onslaughting Sacrifice, his flesh beginning to implode inside him. At that very moment, as if to share in his suffering, his own bifurcated soul hurled insults at him.

"You're one to talk, you know," the heart demon mocked. "At the end of last month, you were making a fuss about wanting to kill everyone in the world. And now? This month's moon hasn't yet gotten full, yet once you heard that you hadn't been expelled from the sect, you turned into a sage concerned about this world. Tch... your face changes more regularly than a woman's period flows. The demonic dragon's flair has been flushed out by your unpredictable cycle."

"If any month's 'cycle' could flush *you* out with it, I'll find a place to go be a monk in, and pray to the Buddha plus be vegetarian all my life..." Han Yuan answered. "Fucking take over for me for a minute! I can't hold up anymore!"

The heart demon snorted, then actually did take over as he had asked.

In this short moment, the boundary between his two souls started to become not-so-clear.

Tang Zhen unfeelingly tossed the bird's body to the side — along with his own corpse that had been silent within Da Xue Mountain for many years, still cherishing that bright red father — like he was trashing refuse from over the years.

He took back his hand that had been scalded by his own puppet charm, eyes filled with murderous machinations as he looked at Shui Keng. “How annoying.”

Immediately after that, he decisively abandoned this puppet-charm-injured ghost, and his primordial spirit pouring into the infinite surrounding ghosts at the same time. All of them — horror-stricken and of every age and gender — widened their eyes simultaneously, each having the identical look in their eyes that was dense with paranoia. They presented before everyone like the grotesque scenery of a nightmare.

Li Yun was the first to recognize the danger here. He immediately rushed over to the yet-unaware Shui Keng on his sword, grabbed the Red Crane's slender bird leg, then dragged her to one side in midair like a swinging bag. At the same time, he opened up the Bag of Hoarding he held, quickly took out handfuls handful of something, and tossed it out several times in a row, resembling a goddess scattering flowers.

Before that series of actions completed, the ghost that had been closest to Shui Keng blew up, still enough to brush past here — if it hadn't been for Li Yun's quick reaction, she would not have died in the explosion, but the puppet charm on her that could only block one fatal injury would have been neutralized.

Tang Zhen had completely face-turned, rebuffing his past self in such a determined manner.

The self-destructed ghost also happened to blow up what Li Yun had thrown into the sky. For a time, a mess of innumerable, colorful potions and

talismans flew all over the place. Large grasshoppers made of paper fell like rain in tandem, swirling up into a whirlwind like a plague of locusts passing through. A huge army of multi-sized insects valiantly cut into the ghost ranks; they had nearly no attacking power, but they were enough to disrupt the senses.

Within that interval, a bottle of Petrifying Water spilled in its entirety onto Han Yuan, and the demonic dragon's body that was soon about to be torn apart temporarily turned into sturdy, crackless rock that resembled a city wall.

Han Yuan suddenly felt cold from head to toe, unable to move at all. "Which side are you on, Li Yun?!" he roared, steam coming out of every orifice. "If you can't help, whatever, but can you not make a mess?!"

Li Yun was towing Shui Keng along in his escape. "I'm helping you hold up for a while! Why are you yelling?"

"Stone cracks, too! What the hell were you thinking, you bastard?!"

Even with that said, Li Yun was a little self-proud. "Haha, don't you worry. That Petrifying Water was made out of heavenly mountain rock, which is definitely tougher than you are."

Why was he still hawking his crap?!

"What the fuck am I supposed to do if I can't change back? Fill in a seat as 'Giant Worm Mountain' for Shu from now on?!"

Li Yun sighed, face full of worries. "Gods' sake, little brother. Just get over it, will you? You were about to be chopped into a bunch of little pieces. That you can live at all is pretty great, yet you still have the nerve to care about what material you're made out of... ah, how awful!"

Tang Zhen was seen to sweep out his sleeve in rage. A wave of eerie ghost qi spread out, and all the grasshoppers hopping about in the sky kicked out their legs and fell, littering the ground with a pitter-patter.

Suddenly, Shui Keng forcibly broke free from Li Yun's hand, spreading her wings at an inconceivable speed and rushing for one side of the mountaintop. Her size increased explosively, bones all over her body making horrible sounds, form getting acutely stretched out in an instant, tail feathers elongating over ten zhang out. In the blink of an eye, she shot into the figure of a fully-grown Red Crane.

She landed upon cut-off mountain rock like an ancient, divine bird descended, her endless flames whirling upwards with the wind, turning into a silhouette in the gloomy sky that looked like it came out of hard-to-articulate folklore.

Li Yun was dumbstruck for a second. Then, he remembered that yao core with other three thousand years in it, and a chill went from his palms to his heart. "Han Tan! What did you do?!"

Shui Keng had no attention to spare him. The Yao King's inner core seemed to be about to swell her up into a ball, her bones and muscles getting lengthened without limit. Her immature, half-yao body felt like every cut of it was suffering the pain of being skinned. She wanted nothing more than to lay down and roll herself into a mudball.

Wind and thunder surged in the sky, containing power, intending to strike this little bird that didn't know the weight of her own barely-there cultivation to death.

Her eldest brother giving her that core had obviously been him treating her as a human being. If a human had a hundred years of life experience, they would expectedly know the severity of things, but he hadn't anticipated that

with her human skin peeled off, she was still a rampaging, senseless bird by nature.

The very second a thunderclap came, she had already started to regret her own moment of impulse, thinking to herself, *I was too hasty... I might be about to die.*

She had believed that she would be in pain and fear, but in reality, she wasn't. Inside ardent fire and thunder cries, she seemed to sight the corpse of that little bird yao. *I should have died long ago, really. If it weren't for my mom guarding me when I was born, if it weren't for our martial grandfather's soul suppressing things by lucky chance when I hatched, if it weren't for my Master and brothers protecting me for so many years... I would have either become a mad and cruel villain like Tang Zhen, or I would have died long ago.*

She felt that her being able to live peacefully to this day had really just been good luck, and it was enough for her.

Thus, she jumped into Sacrifice's effect that Han Yuan was blocking.

The overbearing strength of the technique roiled. Paired with the thunder, the Red Crane, and her raging flames, this looked like a scene left behind from the old era. The multitude of ghosts went unanimously still for some unknown reason, as if this scene was evoking memories from the distant past.

All of a sudden, the near-death puppet charm on Shui Keng's neck exploded with a strong burst of light, heroically bearing the blow. The countless exquisite notches on the talisman had an eye-searing brilliance, looking like someone had once entrusted their most tortuously-hidden emotions inside it.

Tang Zhen felt something seem to crack within his heart that had been deathly still for many years, indicating that the puppet charm connected to him had come to the end of its life.

His emotions had been cut away long ago, and yet a trifling talisman he had left in old times had still loyally done its duty, blocking a catastrophe that should have killed a relative its owner no longer acknowledged.

Shui Keng felt like she had charged through a narrow road full of suffering, or experiencing the process of her hatching once again.

A gasp of damp air suddenly poured into her lungs, her limbs and bones extending to their limits straightaway. The three-thousand-year-old core of the only Yao King that had ever passed of old age in history spun neatly in her inner sanctum. The Red Crane lifted her head to the sky and let out a long cry, spreading out her wings that were just starting to grow long like she was going to vanish the sun and the clouds.

While she screamed, all the ominous ghosts couldn't help but make a path for this fenghuang-[Hou Yi](#). True Fire of Samadhi burst forth, wanting to burn away all the unclean things of the human realm. A huge ring of fire fell inside the array Han Yuan encased, constantly nibbling away at the massive destructive force of Bian Xu's Sacrifice.

Tang Zhen's temporary bewilderment gradually faded from the faces of the ghosts, black qi starting to stir in his eyes again. "My relationship with the Fuyao Sect is quite deep. It's a friendship, really," the ghosts said at the same time, creepily. "I didn't want to take the lives of you juniors, but since you insist upon courting death..."

Tang Zhen, encircled by thousands of ghosts, raised his arms. Countless strings of black qi poured out from the landscape, giving one the illusion that the world itself stored infinite filth, the slightest bit of wind stirring up grass then able to raise massive waves.

This contamination of demonic qi made Han Yuan suck in a deep breath. His own qi that had since calmed down now instantly flowed onto the demonic dragon's half-petrified face, his eyes permeating with an unspeakably terrifying blood-red.

He barely managed to suppress that instinct, struggling to return to calmness. "All of you, get away! Now!"

The gigantic momentum of this demonic qi was so dreadful, even Li yun had a moment of actually believing Tang Zhen's words.

Was the karmic effect of a million resentful souls actually responding to him?

Could it be that an incomprehensible force actually was helping this devil succeed, with no regard for right and wrong?

Where had Heaven's law gone, then?

Tang Zhen laughed crisply. "Do you all really believe that your strong and wise grandfather was strangled to death by the Four Sages merely because he accidentally qi deviated? There are so many demonic cultivators in the world. Why were they never seen hunting them down one by one? I'll tell you why Tong Ru's sin was unforgivable: it's because Fuyao Mountain subdues the Valley of the Heart Demon that the pure qi and demonic qi of the world are able to balance each other out. That 'Wish-Granting Stone' was made from many heart demons, and had been subdued on the Tower of No Regrets; after he selfishly stole and released it, how many wars and famines have happened? How many powerful people have qi deviated? All were beget by the implicit influence of the Valley's seal being lifted these hundred years... speaking of which, demonic dragon. That your cultivation base could be refined to this extent after a mere century can be considered you benefitting from your forebear's foundation."

“You bullshitter—“

Li Yun started, but then the primordial spirit sword that had been quiet for so long was suddenly dyed with a faint swordlight. Sensing the blade’s new movements, as soon as he looked down, hot tears nearly rimmed his eyes on the spot, and he suddenly felt like he had a leg to stand on again.

He didn’t hesitate to release the sword, shouting at You Liang, who was tangled up with a swarm of ghosts. “You, sword cultivator! Take it!”

You Liang grabbed the sword as he heard that. With how powerful Enter the Sheath’s swordwill was, he nearly felt like he had peeped into a great realm the second he touched it — letting out a shout, he tenaciously swept the sword out, sweeping away a large stretch of ghosts blocking the way in front of him, leaving nothing behind.

Tang Zhen jumped in fright, backing up in a panic. You Liang’s improvement in equipment let him raise his sword and make a path in chase. By the time the sword was completely soaked by the demonic qi and dimmed from stress, the majority of the ghosts unable to get away had been purged.

The look in Tang Zhen’s eyes changed a couple of times. He stared malicious at the young sword cultivator not too far away, but his mouth spoke to Yan Zhengming and Cheng Qian. “You were able to get out of the Sea of Beiming... but what use does that have?”

You Liang’s pupils shrunk.

Tang Zhen raised his level palms, many ghosts emerging from his palm. He looked at the sword that had already lost its verve in contempt. “Can you catch up? Can you kill them all?”

Reason told that Yan Zhengming and Cheng Qian indeed would not be able to catch up.

Only when hurrying on the road did the land look so endlessly vast.

Yan Zhengming's brow scrunched up tight. "Damn. Li Yun just used that primordial spirit sword on him."

"There is a way, but I don't know if it can be done," Cheng Qian said. "Swordflight wouldn't be able to keep up, anyways. It would pretty much be treating a dead horse like it's a live one."

"Wh—"

Cheng Qian speedily reached up to tug on the Sect Leader Seal on his neck. "The Valley of the Heart Demon, remember? One of the reasons for Fuyao Mountain's existence is to suppress it. There has to be a passage to get to the Valley through the Seal. We'll walk from there."

Yan Zhengming couldn't understand his reasoning. "Walk the Valley? What do you mean? Isn't it in back of the mountain?"

"It's only sealed in the back mountain, when there's actually nowhere it isn't. Wherever there are humans, there are desires, and there are passages to the get to the Valley. This is an unfrequented region, but Black Tortoise Hall's demonic qi hasn't yet dissipated. Open up the Seal and try it out; whether it works or doesn't will depend on fate."

Knowing that he was limited by the prohibition and couldn't say details, Yan Zhengming didn't inquire as to how he knew this, believing him unconditionally and using his spiritual consciousness to open the Seal.

In a second's time, the two of them saw only black before them, familiar darkness streaming over. Enveloped in the residual heart demon qi of the

ice fields, the vanished from their places.

Cheng Qian's awareness was briefly lost, but quickly recovered. Someone was holding him in the darkness, a faint light shining next to him — he didn't need to see to know that that was his senior's batch of night pearls.

The Valley of the Heart Demon seemed different from the last time they had been here. The demonic qi lingering within it was so thick, it was practically suffocating, arousing all the negative emotions of those that walked it.

Yan Zhengming's heart skipped a beat. Sword cultivators were accompanied by compelling violent tendencies all their lives, thus forever making them more liable to suffer from these influences. He forced his mind to settle. "What's going on, here?"

Cheng Qian's heart sank, and he talked as he walked. "You remember how Tong Ru got the Wish-Granting Stone out of the Tower of No Regrets? He was qi deviating at the time, but he wasn't totally mad, since he had made sure to seal the Valley back up after he took the Stone. Unfortunately, without that pivotal rock, the seal was definitely not as strong as it had been at its conception, and we just-so-happened to tear a hole in it when we broke the Demon Extermination Array."

In spite of Yan Zhengming's heart getting incessantly agitated by the Valley, he still wasn't stupid, reacting immediately at this. "I thought that we'd be fine as long as we got out of there! So, Tang Zhen knew as much at the time... and instead of notifying me, he secretly extracted the demonic qi of the Valley when he was house at Fuyao Mountain? Right... I was the one that invited him over. How could I lead a wolf right into my house like that?"

His rate of speech got faster and faster, speaking to the point of impatience. Nearly unable to restrain the fire in his heart, he grabbed Cheng Qian's arm,

fingers almost pinching his skin; with nowhere to vent his irritability that filled him with annoyance, a faint sigil was almost seen between his brows. “Damn it! You’re not allowed to leave my line of sight!”

Cheng Qian’s core had entered the Dao. Even if his mental state had been sent into turmoil by Hear the Universe’s inheritance, he was slightly more stable than him. Presently not caring to lower himself to the level of his senior that was in rabid dog mode, he inwardly recited the Scripture of Serenity as he answered, “If he hadn’t deliberately showing some of his intentions during Han Yuan’s hearing, and Shang Wan’nian hadn’t brought up that I’d been hit with soul-painting, who would be on guard against an old friend? Calm down. To go straight to Fuyao’s back mountain from here, we’ll need the Seal’s support.”

Yan Zhengming breathed in deeply, then abruptly pushed the Seal in his hand out. The crowd of dotted stars inside the Seal suddenly showed up, making it look like the entire splendid silver river of the sky was spread throughout the Valley, momentarily quelling all the surrounding commotion.

His mind that was heating up cooled some. It was only now that he discovered that he had already torn up Cheng Qian’s sleeve; thankfully, cultivators had body-protecting true essence, and Cheng Qian himself was much more durable than clothing.

He dryly coughed, slightly awkward. “I... um...”

“You sword cultivators are innately ill, blowing up with one little spark. I know,” Cheng Qian picked up. “You don’t need to explain. Finding the exit soon is important.”

Laughing in embarrassment, Yan Zhengming routinely pressed his own spiritual consciousness into the Seal, speedily scouting for everything related to the Valley.

However, the Seal's information was much too complicated. The consciousnesses of Sect Leaders past were all resonating with him while issuing uneasiness here, causing him to be unable to make heads or tails of anything.

At the same time, in Shuzhong's mountains, Tang Zhen sent his ghost army shrieking down. The forbidden technique left by Bian Xu rose unexpectedly, forcing Shui Keng's True Fire to one side.

In this critical juncture, Han Yuan's body suddenly flashed. He was, after all, the demonic dragon, only one step away from being Lord Beiming — even if Ninth Chain-er Li Yun had also entered the realm of the primordial spirit, it was not so easy for the Petrifying Water to hold the other down for long.

The potion's effect was gradually declining, and if the petrification was dissolved right now, Han Yuan would inevitably be assaulted by Sacrifice.

At long last, he quit wrestling with literal material issues. "I can't hold on! Li Yun, throw another bottle!"

"I don't have any!" the other shouted desperately.

After his shout, he shut his eyes that wanted to cry, but held no tears. *Shit... will you still be able to catch up, big brother?*

As the petrification on Han Yuan's body began to recede, the more and more that unstoppable forbidden technique tore him apart with increased intensity, blood trails appearing between each of his scales.

While Yan Zhengming's consciousness was getting beaten black and blue in the Sect Leader Seal, the eight-trigrams plate representing the blood oath suddenly flashed on his hand. The oath had been sighed by Fuyao with Shang Wan'nian, but Han Yuan was the main body of it; he naturally didn't

have the ability to break it, so this could only mean that he was about to go see his ancestors.

Yan Zhengming broke out in a full cold sweat, but only the senses of Sect Leaders were able to come into the Seal. He couldn't ask Cheng Qian for help if he wanted to.

At right that moment, Tong Ru, who he had possessed several times before while in the Seal, suddenly appeared before him. Unlike previous times, he had the delusion that Tong Ru didn't look like a mirage or a memory, but a real person he could see.

Tong Ru's remnant consciousness beckoned to him, and he automatically followed.

He saw Tong Ru pass through countless doorways, countless consciousnesses that extended out to the horizon like smoke, wordlessly bringing him to a large door with a peerlessly distinct red mark, which was identical to the Demon Elimination Seal Wu Changtian had blackmailed him with.

This entrance was concealed, a gap split down its middle. The endless flow of demonic qi from the Valley was escaping through here. Tong Ru stopped in his tracks, nodded at Yan Zhengming, and shortly vanished where he stood.

Yan Zhengming carefully reached, then gently pushed along the crack.

The door banged open.

He promptly drew his consciousness back from the Seal, then witnessed clouds swirling in the air. The innumerable stars revealed from the Seal were being sucked into a huge vortex, getting completely wiped out in no

more than a moment as a black doorway appeared in front of him and Cheng Qian.

He was ecstatic. “Here it is! Let’s go!”

They barged through the large gate, with Yan Zhengming simultaneously bringing down Fuyao’s mountain-sealing order in his capacity as its leader, making the entire mountain reappear.

In Shuzhong, Han Yuan had completely turned back from stone into flesh. He felt like he was being stuck to the ground by uncountable needles. Nowhere on him didn’t hurt, and the pain was so bad, he went numb, unable to keep from thinking, *I’m at least a primordial spirit cultivator. If I die, will my spirit return to my home, too?*

Fuyao Mountain was getting inundated with a layer of indescribable demonic qi. The eight-trigram plate on Yan Zhengming’s hand was flashing with increasing frequency. They flew right past numerous woods and stone steps, and before their bodies yet arrive, a sword strike came hacking down from the air, obliterating the guest house and courtyard Tang Zhen had been staying in. The courtyard’s interior resemble water accumulated after rain, with a thick layer of dark, insolubly stagnant clouds precipitating. The heavy bluestone slabs of it were cut away by Yan Zhengming’s strikes, exposing a big chunk of rock beneath — the cold-outside, warm-inside of the Ice-hearted Fire of Zhaoyang.

Inside it was a corpse whose chest was shining on and off, as if packed with a tiny flame — Tang Zhen had actually hidden his true body of the Soul-Devouring Lamp in Liu Lang’s corpse!

Shuzhong: Sacrifice was stimulated by the demonic qi, viciously busting through Shui Keng’s ring of fire. Flame-red plumage scattered down, resembling a rain of cotton. Ghosts were all over the place. The demonic dragon’s sharp claws were carving straight into the center of the earth; Han

Yuan realized that he could no longer quarrel with him, the two separate egos within him having, at some unknown point in time, merged into one.

Fuyao's summit: Shuang Ren, shrouded in frosty sword qi, headed straight for the Ice-hearted Fire/ Subtlety's sword will poured itself straight into the heart of the large stone via the crack, firmly breaking off a corner of it and making an opening. Liu Lang's corpse, upon noticing that its protective barrier had been pried open, spasmed in terror, then turned into a puff of black wind, wanting to flee.

"Xiao Qian, stand back!"

Yan Zhengming's sword came over, its already-presenting Enter the Sheath like a rotten branch suddenly exposed its hidden edge.

A blade of frost of fourteen provinces, the entire mountain shook for it...

Chapter 108

Tang Zhen paused in midair, the myriad of ghosts freezing in waves after him. Their faces were blank, at first, after which a subtle trace of confusion emerged upon them at the same time.

For a minute, many thoughts in his head resembled sparks blowing out in the wind after a fire had been put out, rising up and falling down in quick succession, a complete mess.

He simply could not fathom this. Who had destroyed his actual form?

Yan Zhengming and Cheng Qian?

But for what reason would they have escaped the Sea of Beiming, then *not* directly followed these people's trail to Shuzhong, but instead go back to Fuyao Mountain?

Since they couldn't freely come and go between limitless space as they wanted, how could they have been able to scramble back in such a short amount of time?

Who had sold out that his body was hidden in the Ice-hearted Fire to them?

Within the lives of these sparks, he was mystified. It was too late for him to fly into a rage.

How could this be?

He had clearly trusted no one, and never had he ever had an emotional bond with any living thing in this world. He was alone, grasping authority over infinite ghosts... yet even that hadn't been entirely foolproof?

The ghosts that filled the sky resembled a group of unaware hanged ghosts. They consecutively stalled in midair. That ghostly and demonic qi curling about them gradually started to scatter, and then they were individually washed clean by some pure, unnamed breeze, fading into ordinary souls and dissolving.

Like a bunch of morning dew that had undergone a night of wind and dust, they quietly returned to the world, drifting clean and free to their next destination, brimming with some sort of tranquil and thought-provoking overtone.

You Liang, gripping Yan Zheng's primordial spirit sword that had since lost its vitality, witnessed all of this at close range, and was stunned to the extreme by the scene.

Tang Zhen's primordial spirit continued to retreat from the vanishing ghosts, ultimately forced to merge back into one piece. His powerful spirit could struggle on after losing his body.

He didn't flee, perhaps because he was too flabbergasted and forgot, or maybe it never crossed his mind in his stupefaction.

"It doesn't make sense..." he muttered. "The karma of the souls clearly reacted to me. This is impossible... how could something set in stone change? It makes no sense..."

Li Yun was the first to react. "What are you all staring like idiots for?!"

Shui Keng and You Liang responded immediately — right, this guy was the grandmaster of the ghost cultivator path, and there was no one in the world that was more proficient in soul techniques than he. Once he was in his element, he might be held up for a year or two, but then would use some sort of unprecedented means to make a roaring comeback.

The sword You Liang held made a sharp sound, sealing off Tang Zhen's escape route. Li Yun drew the ornamental sword from his waist, and, together with Shui Keng, charged at the same time.

Tang Zhen's physical body had just been shattered, and he was getting backlashed by the ghosts that were constantly flying away, his primordial spirit at its weakest point. Not having any time to dodge, he was pierced through by two successive bands of sword qi.

Stiffly arching his head back, he met the Samadhi fires head-on.

Inside that vicious fire, Tang Zhen's still-puzzled gaze slowly fell to Shui Keng.

His memories from before his death came like a returning tide, hurtling through endless plotting, through his even more endless purgatory-esque period of contest with the Soul-Devouring Lamp, though that last final parting...

And ending on one feather.

That feather swayed lightly in his heart. His lips moved slightly, but he couldn't say anything.

Some people's lives were only in either black or white. All the bright colors were like the brief bloom of night flowers to him — floating for a single second, and gone once the bloom was done.

With Shui Keng in his eyes, his battered primordial spirit vanished like smoke.

The path of Heaven was ever-changing. How could its machinations ever be exhaustively calculated by humans?

Perhaps he had understood that truth, in his final moment.

Like he was in a dream, Li Yun practically couldn't believe that this sword of his had a day it saw blood, and even slaughtered a great demon that had no predecessor, nor would have a successor. He maintained an expression of matchless astonishment, thinking that he could peel off his armor, return home, and put this ornamental, pretty-but-useless sword on display forevermore.

While he was unable to orient himself, Han Yuan snarled angrily, "I'm going to die! Things aren't done over here! Why are you standing there and not helping me?!"

Getting shouted at back to his senses, Li Yun then remembered the mess Bian Xu had left. He landed on the ground from his sword while practically pissing himself; Sacrifice hadn't actually weakened all that much, and the demonic qi Tang Zhen had just summoned wasn't intending to go away at all.

Shui Keng immediately turned her head around and re-circled Sacrifice in fire, allowing the near-death Han Yuan to sigh in relief.

Li Yun took out a handful of pills and tossed them into Han Yuan's mouth without demand for money, accurately blocking his voice behind him. Han Yuan choked half to death on them. Despite wanting to wear his mouth out cursing him, he had no spare space to talk.

Temporary rest and wound medication allowed his open wounds to slowly start to close. What a shame it was that the medicine could cure the symptoms, but not the root. Were Shui Keng to not maintain her guard for one second, Sacrifice would charge out and put another gash in him.

Having reached this point, Han Yuan finally recognized that he might have committed too many sins. How soul-melting this feeling of suffering this

death-by-a-thousand-cuts-like pain again and again did not need to be brought up.

With a wave of Li Yun's hand, the insect army that Tang Zhen had recently knocked down to the ground was renewed with life, jumping all over the terrain to scout for him. The already-broken Demon Extermination Array and the Spirit-Collection Array Bian Xu had set up for Sacrifice were both messaged back to his eyes — with Sacrifice completed, the latter had no present use.

You Liang, a sword cultivator that had absolutely no foundation in array-making, frowned. “Senior, this is not the way to do it. Even if we all expend ourselves into human husks, Sacrifice's power will still likely be hard to diminish.”

“Uncle...”

A feeble cry came from nearby. Li Yun looked back to see that Nian Dada was entirely smushed beneath a pile of rocks, his head exposed via him pulling himself through a gap with difficulty. “I... I-I...”

Li Yun dug him out with total worry, feeling that Nian Dada would definitely be getting sorted out by his Master later.

Nian Dada crawled out while coughing, covered in dirt and dust. “I know... that this area isn't far from Mingming Valley. There's a stretch of barren mountain connected behind the Valley. The cliffs there are a thousand zhang deep, treacherous and uninhabited.”

“How do you know that no one's there?” Li Yun wondered.

“I fell off during swordflight once. My dad sent the whole Valley out, and only managed to get me back after over half a month below...”

“Alright, keep your humiliating stories to yourself and lead the way. Shui Keng, you and You Liang will help Han Yuan defend for a while, and anyone else that’s still alive will come over and help me. We’re going to make a Spirit-Drawing Array with the wasted Spirit-Collection Array as a basis so that Sacrifice’s brunt will be lured to the barren mountain.”

“Hurry it up!” Han Yuan shouted.

As he flew away with a crowd on swords, Li Yun shouted back, “Bear with it, okay? If you really do get split in two, I’ll put in a good word with our eldest. Maybe he’ll give you the True Dragon Flag.”

Han Yuan was lacking a dragon skeleton, and had been coveting the Flag for a long time. Upon hearing this, he became unbelievably peaceful on the spot, no longer hassling him with obscenities. “Thank you so much, second brother! Don’t any of you worry, I won’t have any trouble holding up for half a month!”

Li Yun got goosebumps from getting thanked by him, refusing to turn his head.

Although the Soul-Devouring Lamp was shattered, the Valley of the Heart Demon was still open, and the demonic qi on Fuyao Mountain hadn’t gone away at all, either.

Yan Zhengming was mentally connected to the Sect Leader Seal, able to feel that there was yet a consistent flow of demonic qi seeping out of the passage they had just gone through. “Is that ‘Hear the Universe’ of yours telling you how to seal this up?” he asked Cheng Qian directly.

“That isn’t something it needs to tell me.” Cheng Qian retracted Shuang Ren, then turned to look in the direction of the Residence of Peace. “I can already guess what it is...”

Yan Zhengming stared blankly for a second, then realized what he was referring to, immediately becoming astonished.

“You’re not saying that we need to take that rock back to the Tower of No Regrets, right?” His impatience that had been stirred up by the bottomless Valley had since been mostly vented by that earth-shattering sword strike, and he was temporarily back to his usual incompetent state. “A hundred and eight thousand steps, the Tower of No Regrets, going up it... by my ancestors, you’ve got to be messing with me.”

Cheng Qian gave him a look, showing that he was serious.

Yan Zhengming got a massive headache. “It’s not like you haven’t seen the Tower before! I was knocked down after going up one step last time! After we finish with all those stairs, we’ll probably be able to go see our martial grandfather!”

Had this taken place earlier in time, Cheng Qian would definitely have refused listened to his crap, taken the Wish-Granting Stone, and gone long ago. He wasn’t sure when it had started, but he had gradually begun to realize that that sort of attitude was actually, in Yan Zhengming’s view, a type of wounding.

All of his lifelong patience was being overdrafted for Yan Zhengming’s sake. He waited until the other was done whining, then asked without annoyance, “Are you going, or not?”

Sweeping a queasy look at the pervasive demonic qi nearby, Yan Zhengming’s shoulders drooped. “...I am.” Saying so, he gripped his sword, then took the lead in going to the Residence. “We’ll try it out! Dead horse, living horse, there’s forever more problems than solutions... pah!”

His body’s weariness, mouth’s crassness, and heart’s bitterness were all depleted within this slip of the tongue.

Upon arrival at the Residence, that Wish-Granting Stone, originally like a pond of stagnant water, now had a glow inside it that resembled a floating light. It almost looked to be ‘flowing’, simply having an incomparable magnetism.

The glow was akin to a lover’s limpid gaze, automatically ensnaring one within it. In but a short moment of looking at it, he was reaching for it, slightly entranced.

However, right before his hand touched the stone, he finally remembered that the ‘real deal’ was by his side, so that hand made a detour to land upon Cheng Qian’s shoulder in a meandering fashion.

He looped around Cheng Qian’s neck, giving a long, utterly pathetic sigh. “It’s good that you’re here.”

Cheng Qian didn’t rashly go to touch the thing. He had brought the Ice-hearted Fire that Shuang Ren had pried open along with him; one end of the stone was split open, while the other side was more or less intact, once polished by Tang Zhen. He barely managed to stuff the Stone into it, provisionally disconnecting the rich demonic qi that was winding around it. “Don’t mess around. Use the Seal to open the way for me, now.”

Knowing that they couldn’t delay, Yan Zhengming speedily and obediently opened the passage to the Valley, yet also couldn’t press down his own dissatisfaction. “Why haven’t *you* been affected?”

Across the partition of the half-chunk of Ice-hearted Fire, Cheng Qian shouldered the weight of the Wish-Granting Stone as he took large strides forwards. “How do you know it hasn’t affected me?” he asked without turning his head.

Yan Zhengming was startled, hurrying to follow him. “Really? In what way is it affecting you? If it’s all disorganized and irrelevant stuff, then

whatever. If it's related to me, can you put on a show of it every once in a while and make me happy... what are you walking so fast for?!"

"To make your brain dry off a bit with the wind."

They found the Tower down a now-familiar road.

Yan Zhengming's crow beak had once again shown off its peerlessly good looks, as he had hit the nail on the head — there were indeed more problems than solutions. They tested out countless different methods, whether it was trying to use primordial spirit swords to send the Stone higher up the Tower or all kinds of bizarre artifacts, and all of them landed on air.

The one-hundred-and-eight-thousand steps of the Tower went straight into the horizon, their height frightening as they looked down upon all living things, not tolerating the least bit of trickery.

Cheng Qian preemptively ascended a step. All the true essence around him seemed to evaporate, leaving no trace that it had ever been there at all. Before he could even come to stand stably, a burst of brutal astral wind came from the top down, rocking the both of them.

His body-protecting essence already gone like vapor, his limbs were heavy, like they'd been shackled. It made him feel like he was no different from a mortal. He drew Shuang Ren and swept it out horizontally; without true essence, all of his power came from his bones and blood. After the collision, his wrist was harshly jolted, and had he not had many years of relentless training in sword techniques, he would not have turned to the side to shake off the force in time, nearly plummeting from the stone steps.

Yan Zhengming held him up by his middle. "Careful... how do we get up? Our grandfather had to have been a pack mule."

Cheng Qian massaged his numbed wrist. “Sect Leader, verbally disrespecting your ancestors is still disrespect. If we can’t go up, but need to, what would you say should be done?”

What should be done?

Yan Zhengming’s first answer to that was to haphazardly seal up that crack and leave this difficult issue for later generations, so in the event that an apprentice or grand-apprentice ended up being Tong Ru’s sort of talent, *they* could be the one to put in that hard effort.

Unfortunately, he still wanted to have some dignity in Cheng Qian’s presence. That idea sneakily circulated his heart, but he didn’t have the cheek to express it, only able to sigh and help the other walk up the Tower.

After going like so for only a hundred or so steps, Cheng Qian’s breathing had since become prominently heavier. He kept incessantly moving his wrist, its bones cracking like they had suffered injury. Each step he took seemed to be filled with lead.

Yan Zhengming stuffed the Stone into his own arms as he also seized Shuang Ren. “Why don’t you speak up, if you’re running out of strength? From this point on, we’ll switch every one hundred steps! No one needs to show off.”

With the Ice-hearted Fire added to the Stone, its weight was about a hundred or so catties. To a cultivator, that was no different from a feather, but right now, Cheng Qian had nearly stumbled from it pressing heavily down and almost sapping his strength, cramping his wrist.

He raised his head to look at the infinite heavenly staircase, smiling painfully. “Without changing back into a mortal, one won’t know how lacking in skill they actually are.”

Yan Zhengming brandished his sword to ward away a streak of astral wind, taking the time to glance at Cheng Qian and tease him. “With how handsome of a Young Master you are, even if you were mortal, who would be willing to let you do the physical labor of carrying a rock?”

Under that topic, Yan Zhengming didn’t wait for Cheng Qian to answer before he was already getting proud delusions, amusing himself with ideas. “If we were all mortals, I’d definitely be a rich landlord, and you, uh... you’d most likely be a poor scholar.”

“...Why a poor scholar?”

“You’re the type that can only spend, never make. You wouldn’t be able to resist being a spendthrift with mountains of money. If someone like you could be wealthy, then the sun will rise from the West. As for me, I’d probably be a lawless, godless fop. A fop coming across a poor scholar wouldn’t be hard. No need to worry about anything; I would straight-up rely on having money and power to get a bunch of lackeys and kidnap you!” he said like he was completely in the right.

“...”

He felt a sense of admiration towards his senior’s self-awareness.

“After kidnapping you, I’d wheedle, cajole, promise, and threaten you. First, I’d settle you in nice and give you whatever you wanted, and then, if you refused to acknowledge your situation, I’d use your family and friends as blackmail. In other words, I’d pester you all day long with no extreme I wouldn’t go to. Tell me; supposing that time allowed, would you give in?”

It was like Yan Zhengming was speaking something as true as him having a nose and eyes. Cheng Qian quietly listened, the melancholy amongst his features slowly going away completely in the wake of the other’s voice.

Upon this Tower of danger at every step, he showed an indulgent smile.
“Not likely.”

Yan Zhengming was quite rueful. “Ah, right. You’ve been awful and stubborn since childhood while giving off an air of refinement. You’ve also got a temper as bad as a rock in a latrine. It definitely wouldn’t be easy to nab you. Hm... what should I have done, then?”

“If you’d be willing to try out seduction, that might have an effect.”

By coincidence, a slice of astral wind came up prior to the daydreaming Sect Leader Yan being able to come back to himself after that utterance of ‘seduction’. Sloppily, he used Shuang Ren to block, retreating a few steps back — one side of him went off-balance and narrowly made him roll off the Tower, but Cheng Qian luckily freed up a hand to grab him.

Cheng Qian effortlessly took the Stone and retrieved his sword. “It’s been another hundred steps. Swapping time.”

Then, an inexplicable thought came to him, and he turned to add something on in the midst of getting full-body goosebumps. “...My beauty.”

Yan Zhengming rubbed his nose in embarrassment. “You dare to tease your Sect Leader? I’ve really gotten so used to you, you’re about to revolt... hum. Have you recuperate from that damned inheritance now?”

The smile on Cheng Qian’s face faded away. He went quiet for several steps, a string of messy clangings from the sword and astral wind colliding to be heard.

Right as Yan Zhengming believed that he didn’t plan on answered, the other suddenly did. “In the Da Xue Mystic Site, in order to stave off the soul-painting, I borrowed your sword qi to break open Hear the Universe’s seal by force, and accept the inheritance...”

He slightly paused, his following words blocked by the prohibition. He went quiet for longer still, then whispered, “It almost merged my spiritual consciousness into *it*.”

“It? Where’s ‘it’?” Yan Zhengming asked on instinct.

The other made not a sound, holding Shuang Ren’s slightly-shivering hilt. After fending off astral wind, the tip of his sword revolved around evenly, drawing out a cyclic circle, after which he raised his head to gaze at the lightless sky above the Valley of the Heart Demon.

Yan Zhengming instantly caught onto something.

Cheng Qian didn’t even pay divine tribulations mind. What would be able to fuse with his spiritual consciousness, and swallow his primordial spirit?

Hear the Universe... the universe?

He watched his back, doubtful. Thinking back to that baseless bell sound he had heard through the wooden sword, he asked, “The ‘it’ in Hear the Universe is... the actual path of Heaven?”

As per standard, Cheng Qian could not answer.

Merging into the path of Heaven... that sounded like ‘ascension’, but Yan Zhengming hadn’t detected much anticipation in Cheng Qian’s tone. When he had just gotten out, the other had even been a little dazed, looking like he was trapped inside a deadland, unable to return to his senses from a nightmare.

He recalled what Han Muchun had once said to him when he was young: “Ascension... is basically death.”

For a moment, Yan Zhengming had the wildest guess: was there actually an ‘upper realm’ for cultivators to ascend to?

‘Ascension’ meant ‘cultivating until awakened’, which meant ‘attaining the Dao. So, had those that attained the Dao reformed an immortal realm out of that ‘upper realm’?

Do those that have attained the Dao also have a distinction between good and evil, and fighting amongst themselves?

But, when beginning cultivation, regardless of one’s sect, was the very first lesson passed down by their Master not ‘the Great Dao is formless, emotionless, and nameless’?

If an individual truly became formless, emotionless, and nameless, their consciousness merging into the Heavens and the Earth, were they still a person? Did they still know who they were? Did they remember the love and hatred they’d had in their previous life? Were they still... alive?

“There’s actually no such thing as attaining the Dao and becoming immortal, is there?” he asked, voice hushed.

Cheng Qian kept silent. Three strong cuts of astral wind suddenly came in a row. He flicked his wrist out, making three strikes, the tendons on his wrist jumping out harshly. His figure, as seen from the back, held an unspeakable devastation.

For uncountable generations of cultivators, ‘eternal life’ was akin to a carrot on a string leading them on, binding them in endless, lonely, bitter cultivation, disallowing them from being productive and fighting over things with mortals.

The majority of cultivating sects, like Mingming Valley, shielded one party, accepted mortal’s offerings, or sold charms to mortals. Excluding a few

major disasters, cultivators and mortals had always been at peace.

Those like Tang Zhen, corroded to their bones by the Soul-Devouring Lamp, would still be reluctant to see blood, on account of the path of Heaven's binds.

Those like the Third Prince, wildly ambitious, would even relinquish the throne for the pursuit of eternal life... though he did end up walking a nefarious path.

Yet, if there came a day where these cultivators learned that they were just like mortals, where their end was death and what they sought was nothing more than an imaginary hope, what would become of those superpowers that could wield the elements so easily?

Their abilities were unmatched, readily capsizing oceans. To cultivators, mortals were akin to a group of ants in imminent danger. Nothing existed in the world that could possibly restrain them, all the nobility and generals of the human world a joke. The strong would be respected. The collapse of proper society would be inevitable. How much miasma would this land hold?

Then... had this been the cause of the forebears of the ten major sects having sealed this secret into Hear the Universe, signing the Ten-Party Pledge, and leaving the Celestial Divination Bureau's existence well alone?

Yan Zhengming had no idea if that all was just his own random thoughts, but there was no way for him to pursue the truth back to its source, in the end.

Cheng Qian would never be able to tell.

"How did you struggle free of it later on, then?" Yan Zhengming asked.

Shuang Ren's snow-bright swordlight lit up the gloomy Tower of No Regrets. Cheng Qian paused for just a moment as he held the sword, standing in place with it, and tilted his head to gaze deeply at Yan Zhengming.

The latter couldn't help but think back to his abnormally serious 'thank you' from Da Xue, and his heartbeat sped until his mouth was dry.

There's no need to explain any complex details; you are already my unbreakable tether to this world of red dust.

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Epilogue

Within the continuous Shu mountains, Li Yun's exceptionally enormous Spirit-Drawing Array took a full ten days to arrange.

Its set-up had been no different from ditch-digging. The entire time, he hadn't dared to make a single mistake, out of fear that one bad part would cause disaster for the region.

Anyone in this group still able to breathe had all been run around in circles by him. Some had lead the way, some had gone to search for spiritual stones all over the place, some had helped compute the arrangement of the array. After the passage of ten day, they were all spent, to say nothing Han Yuan and Shui Keng, who had been taking turns holding off Sacrifice.

All of the pills the group had had gone into those two's stomachs.

When Shii Keng had just swallowed that yao core, she had felt that the thing was going to make her burst. Now, though, she thought that three-thousand years wasn't of any use at all — she needed thirty-thousand!

The second Li Yun declared that the array was finished, Han Yuan could no longer maintain his dragon form, instantly turning into a human and collapsing into a half-dead, paralyzed heap on the group. He had expended too much, the deathly aura of an incurable illness nearly coming off of his face.

Even so, this devil that was on death's door stubbornly reached out a paw and desperately grabbed Li Yun's foot, his breath like gossamer. "Don't... forget... the Flag..."

Li Yun didn't have the spare time to openly mock him, immediately peeling his shoe off and going up on his flying sword with one bare foot.

He flew like the wind, tense beyond compare while he followed along Sacrifice's path as it whizzing through the Spirit-Drawing Array. His originally-abundant Bag of Hoarding had been dumped clean for this thing, all of his spiritual items and talismans completed used up, but even so, he had still underestimated the technique's strength.

It nearly leaked out of the Array several times. At each occurrence of a rupture in the array's workings, this group of cultivators would go into an uproar like burlaks on a riverbank, swarm up, fix it, and block it up. With how this work looked when it was in full swing, it was like they were making huge ditches in the mountains of Shu.

The White Tiger elder had been injured by the ghosts, messed up to the point that he didn't look like a person, yet persisted with charging forwards on the very frontlines. He crouched on his sword in the sky with both arms resting on his knees, mouth agape and neck stretched out as he witnessed at close hand how Sacrifice flowed downwards like a flood. In passing, he caught Nian Dada, who was about to run into him like a headless fly, and set him to the side, mumbling, "We actually did it..."

Seeing this, Li Yun immediately issued a signal from the distant and waved like his life depended on it, ordering everyone that was on a flying item to get down.

The next moment, the boom of splitting earth rose up from the level ground, and all the people that were still stupidly parked in midair were effected by it, stumbling off their weapons in succession.

This Sacrifice seemed to contain immeasurable grudges, rages, enmities, and despairs, flowing down from the high cliffs at a slant. Like a river of stars overturns, it landed on the ground and became a lake, gurgling and shifting, razing countless barren mountains flat. The original landmass was completely unrecognizable, its unfathomably deep precipices displaying vicious grooves.

Gods...

The shaking of the land caused by Sacrifice took a full day and a half before its dust settled. Li Yun had his shoeless foot raised in a [golden rooster](#) pose, blankly mumbling, “That you could block this for even a second... Han Yuan, you’re a pretty promising punk.”

Han Yuan, on his last breath, did not answer, looking like he had already suffered the loving caress of his dead ancestors.

“What’s wrong with him?” Shui Keng anxiously asked.

Li Yun leaned over to size Han Yuan up for a short bit, then shook his head. “Oh, dear. Looking at you like this, I might not be able to get that True Dragon bone for you. You’re lacking a dragon skeleton, yet are already like this; if you actually do get one, wouldn’t you overturn the sky?”

The formerly near-death Han Yuan immediately came back to life at that, beginning to struggle like the rays of a setting sun and doing all he could to throw that shoe he had at Li Yun. “You wouldn’t dare! We’ll be enemies for life!”

The Estate elder, ever with free hands, contacted a few major sects in Shuzhong, including Mingming Valley. The sects knew right from wrong; the very next day, they all sent various wound medications and supplements, and the group rested in Shuzhong for over half a month before continuing southward.

Aware that he had helped clean up Tang Zhen and Bian Xu, after his recovery, Han Yuan became all the more cocky, taking the initiative to efficiently slaughter in warning a couple demonic cultivators that had the gall to rebel on the road. By the time they reached Nanjiang, the demons that had gotten disloyal due to the deaths of the Nine Sages were basically already intimidated by Han Yuan, quickly going dormant.

“That area up ahead where miasmic qi is blocking the road is where the Nightmare Travelers are,” Han Yuan said. “You righteous sects aren’t welcome here. Scram.”

Shui Keng stuck her neck out from behind him, very curious about the highest den of demons in the land. “Brother, are you demonic cultivators the type to rob wealth and beauties?”

“Yeah.” Han Yuan looked at her, sneering in full contempt. “But we only steal human beauties, not birds with long tailfeathers. You don’t need to worry.”

She wrathfully spewed fire at the back of his head.

“Don’t forget to deliver the True Dragon Flag to me.” He waved his hand to dissolve her little fireball, then he strode towards the hideout of the Nightmare Travelers.

With one flick of his sleeve, a huge mountain gate appeared out of nowhere, the word ‘Nightmare’ boldly inscribed on it the spitting image of a monster with a bloody, gaping maw. Dark and eerie demonic qi floated up and down and fused with the miasma of the forest, making this look indescribably sinister.

A blood-red, eight-trigram diagram flew out of his panlong robes’ tattered sleeve, smacked right next to ‘Nightmare’, and immediately left a sigil of bloodied qi on it.

The bloody symbol was like a drop of oil going into boiling water. In short order, countless pairs of prying eyes rose and fell within the Valley of the Nightmare Travelers, cautiously observing the returning devil.

He wore clothes as ragged as a beggar’s, but his gait was like a regent’s that was returning to his court, his figure gate-crashing the demons’ native land

without a care.

Pitifully, that was ruined after no more than a few steps. Shui Keng, who had just wanted to roast him into a husk, suddenly felt empty-hearted again upon seeing his retreating figure, and couldn't help but loudly cry out, "Brother! We'll come find you to play later!"

"..."

Play, my ass, Han Yuan thought, gritting his teeth. *You lost me face.*

An enormous dragon silhouette flashing behind him, he dove headfirst into Nanjiang's miasma like the Azure Dragon entering the sea, and didn't look back.

He would be standing guard here for all of his life.

The group went their separate ways from here. You Liang, who had finished the funereal rites of the Bureau, had nowhere to go — Li Yun went along with Yan Zhengming's promise to Wu Changtian, deciding to bring him back to Fuyao Mountain.

In contrast, after reporting as much, Nian Dada went to the East Sea alone to look for Nian Mingming's reincarnation.

However, wasn't finding an unremarkable infant boy amongst this sea of people something easier said than done? On top of that, Han Yuan had only told him a general direction, nothing precise.

Nian Dada spent several days wandering about the East Sea's vicinity. Refusing to back down, he thought to find a place to stay in for a time and slowly scout around.

Pretending to be a mortal, he sought people out to inquire after cheap places to lodge, then was led by a fisherman to a very remote area on the East Sea's shore. There was a wolfberry tree that was so big, it would turn into a spirit soon; its branches stuck out at random, seeming like they had sky-reaching ambitions, and it had rows upon rows of hanging fruit as red as blood beads. Beneath this tree sat a small, worn-down courtyard.

A few large rocks near the entrance made up a pigpen. Beside the entrance was a couplet pair; the left said 'Three coins a night', and the right said 'Stay or piss off'.

Nian Dada was subdued by this overbearingness. It took a long time for him to shyly knock on the door, and he dared not do it loudly, just like a scratching mouse.

Following a good deal of scratching, no one answered. He was about to leave, only to hear a creak as a burly man came out from inside. He was obviously mortal, yet his entire being had an aura that was majestic, but not violent.

The beefy guy glared at him. "Have you not eaten your fill? You're not going to give a real knock? Are you staying, or what?!"

Nian Dada was pressured by the unspeakable bearing of this mortal. "Y-Yes, S-Senior... I'm staying," he blurted.

"Senior?" The man raised a brow, voice like a gong. "Huh. All that messing around, and you're a cultivator. I've never seen such a good-for-nothing, useless one like you before. Pay and get in here!"

Nian Dada dared not have a hint of objection, smoothly getting in.

It wasn't until he had stayed in the East Sea for over two months that the demonic qi over the land slowly settled, then vanished.

The one-hundred-and-eight-thousand steps of the Tower of No Regrets had forced two superpowers of the modern world to trudge through it for right about a whole three months.

The two had uncountable wounds of all sizes on their bodies. At this moment, even Cheng Qian, the second he caught sight of the top, couldn't help but stumble, nearly landing in a kneel.

This had been way too hard. Shuang Ren's swordlight had been worn down into dimness. He pretty much wanted to roll straight off of here — he had no idea how Tong Ru had managed to ascend back in the day.

The Tower was empty, quiet, and somber. Yan Zhengming suddenly stopped in his tracks from where he was walking in front.

“What is it?” Cheng Qian asked hoarsely, exhausted.

“Come and look.”

A footprint was seen on the Tower, inundated with blood. As of now, the bloodstain betrayed the color of old rust, but had still been faithfully preserved by the Tower, having not faded for centuries.

Just from seeing this shocking footprint, one could imagine what the scene of Tong Ru barging in alone had been: as one foot tread upon the Tower, the other was still on the stone steps, his body full of wounds.

He must have been at the end of his trajectory, weakly supporting himself on his knees with heavy hands, in order to leave such a serious footprint behind.

When he had exhausted the very last of his strength to look up at the dazzling Wish-Granting Stone, had it seemed like he was seeing an out-of-reach dream?

No one had taken turns holding the sword and defending each other with him. He had been alone, burdened with impetuous thoughts, having nowhere to relay them. Under the dual interrogation of his heart demon and his conscience, he had turned his back on the mortal realm, stepping on blood.

Thinking as such, even though his juniors knew well that he had qi deviated out of selfish desires, thus attracting many calamities, they suddenly couldn't criticize him.

The original impression of the Wish-Granting Stone was still there. Subsequent to a short moment of rest, they withdrew it from the Ice-hearted Fire in a flurry of limbs.

The Stone acted like it was alive. Given that it was gently pushed, it would return to its rightful place, then settle in seamlessly. The light flowing inside it went stagnant for a moment, the demonic qi eternally coiling around it seeming to turn into a handful of fine ash, which quickly disappeared.

Not a speck of dust tainted the Tower, and not a talisman was seen, yet it still gave one a sense of extreme silence. All the various types of excessive hopes and ambitions in people's hearts could automatically be quelled upon coming here, returning one's behavior and nature to purity.

Trudging up those one-hundred-and-eight-thousand steps was like the ending to surviving one-hundred-and-eight-thousand calamities.

Cheng Qian heard those complex cries, shouts, laughs, and roars all get far away from him, like a dream that he had been submerged in for years had reached its end, an unprecedented clearness in his mind, like he was once again hearing the distant path of Heaven in the universe again.

His legs were a bit numb, feet staggering beneath him, so he simply followed his instincts and laid on his back, listening to the surrounding

chaotic heart demons gradually calm and become meek. He felt like he didn't have a single bit of energy

Yan Zhengming was not any sort of better off than he was. Putting the majority of his weight onto Shuang Ren as he leaned on it, he stood there in a blank daze. "Back when Tong Ru made a wish on the Wish-Granting Stone, he was willing to make a million resentful souls as a sacrifice... what now, then? What happened with that?"

Cheng Qian shut his eyes, answering almost inaudibly. "Nothing happened. The Stone didn't actually grant him his wish, now, did it?"

The bloodline of Fuyao was still cut off. Master Muchun was still dead.

Thus was why people had severed all ties and left, one by one, and the human world had still been dragged into drawn-out chaos...

...coming to a rest only just today.

The calamity had been like an inferno raging across fields, unfeelingly and unstoppably crushing what it passed, everything ruined into ashes.

Only tender sprouts yet silently burgeoned in the spring wind after the deathly stillness went by.

'A Withered Tree Meets Spring' was like a beginning, and also, perhaps, an ending.

Yan Zhengming stood there quietly for a while. "After we get back, take me to the Valley of No Worries when you have the time. I kind of want to see Master and our martial grandfather."

"You want to go and show off to them how you've pulled against a wild tide this past century and made the majestic achievement of revitalizing the

sect, right?” Cheng Qian blabbed.

“...”

The sensation of being seen right through by his junior... was pretty uncomfortable.

Shamed into anger, he raised his leg and gave Cheng Qian a kick. “I told you to lead the way, so lead the way! Why are you talking so much shit?!”

Unfortunately, this planned trip was doomed to disappoint.

Two months later, Yan Zhengming held a ‘Blindfold Leaf’ in his mouth, struggling to conceal his own ire as he hurried to infiltrate the Valley of No Worries at the split second of dusk with Cheng Qian. The two passed through ghostly creatures the whole journey, then found Tong Ru’s burial site down a familiar path.

However, the bones that had been there were not seen.

They searched the site several times over, finding nothing. Cheng Qian almost suspected that they had remembered the wrong spot, until he finally dug out a copper coin spotted with corrosion from under the giant tree.

Then, he remembered that Tong Ru had said that they likely wouldn’t be able to meet again the next time.

In all likelihood, the man’s penance term had probably been fulfilled, his heavy sin redeemed, and he had finally gone to be one with the land and its greenery.

By dawn, they left the Valley on the same road they had taken. After spitting out the Blindfold Leaf, Yan Zhengming asked, “Have their souls scattered?”

Cheng Qian thought it over. “It would be better to say that they ascended.”

With a thought like that, the heart suddenly felt at ease.

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Proprietor Wen and the Li'l Butterball

Half a year later, Nian Dada said his farewells to Proprietor Wen, settled his room charge, and prepared to return to Fuyao Mountain. Proprietor Wen — surname Wen, given name Jing — was the proprietor of the run-down inn that was ‘three coins a night’, and he had a big round belly. In his youth, he had worked as an armed escort, covered in a heroic aura as he ran all around jianghu, and could have eaten eight big mantous in one meal.

Their scene of farewell had not the slightest bit of sorrow to it, because there was third friend present that was really messing with it.

This friend was no more than three chi tall, his baby teeth all freshly grown in. At first glance, there was scant difference between his height and width — were he to encounter a slope, he basically wouldn’t need to spend any energy walking, as he could just roll down it. At this moment, he was holding Nian Dada’s thigh, howling hard enough to fracture his organs and weeping miserably. “Mom... mom, don’t go!”

This little friend had countless ‘moms’, with no distinction between gender and age. One amongst them was the mother that had birthed him, and the rest were all moms that he had come to acknowledge: whoever fed him was whoever he cared to call ‘mom’.

Proprietor Wen covered one of his ears. “Didn’t you say that you came to find someone?” he growled at Nian Dada. “Go find them... ai, think of a way to make this imp quit howling!”

“Go get him candy!” Nian Dada snarled, shredding his throat to do all he could to overpower the cub’s lung-tearing wails.

“Where the fuck am I going to find candy?!” Proprietor Wen asked, after which he angrily went inside, rummaged out a chunk of braised duck neck

from the kitchen, then roughly stuffed it into the li'l butterball's mouth.
“Just eat it!”

The plump kid gurgled a bit, tasted the flavor, and immediately quit caring about Nian Dada, crouching nearby to peacefully eat.

Proprietor Wen looked at the butterball sourly. “It can’t be *him* that you were looking for, surely?”

Nian Dada looked ashamed.

“Right. I’ve heard before that you cultivators focus on reincarnation, but this Daoist pal of yours didn’t practice the divine arts of having a huge stomach in his past life, yeah?”

“...”

Even though he hadn’t... that honestly wasn’t that far off.

The reincarnated child that practiced divine huge stomach arts grinned carefreely at Proprietor Wen, and his buttcheeks clapped as he ran over in front of him, the duck neck held in his mouth. “Mom!” he crisply called out as he tilted his head back.

“Get out of here,” Proprietor Wen answered blankly.

After that scolding, though, he appeared to suddenly get a bit emotional.
“Speaking of reincarnation, ever since I grew thoughtful, I went to all sorts of places, yet all of them felt lacking in something. It wasn’t until I came to the East Sea that it felt like I was coming back home... I heard that a lot of cultivators came and went from this region a hundred years ago. Tell me, would I happen to be the reincarnation of someone?”

Hearing that, Nian Dada tentatively probed, “Do you mean to seek immortality and question the Dao, Proprietor Wen? How about I recommend you—“

“Hey, I was just saying.” Proprietor Wen waved him off, casually petting the top of the butterball’s big bald head. “I feel like even if I do cultivate, I won’t amount to much, and after I study, I’ll still want to open a little inn and be its proprietor, the same as I am now. Cultivators come, cultivators go. It’s all just about as necessary as taking off your pants to fart... alright, I’ll stabilize this great ancestor for you, go on now. May destiny allow us to meet again.”

Nian Dada looked profoundly at the butterball, then ended up saying nothing, leaving by himself.

He had gotten the thought to bring Nian Mingming’s reincarnation with him, but upon seeing that the little boy had no worries for food and clothing all his life, both of his parents, and mingled in the streets like a fish in water, he suddenly felt it to be pointless.

Presumably, in Nian Mingming’s opinion, flying high in the sky might not get him the same kind of happiness he got nibbling on duck neck as he crouched on the ground.

So, why trouble him?

Portrait

After it was said that the dust of many incidents had settled, everyone successively returned to Fuyao Mountain, finally getting comfy. Yan Zhengming repeatedly ordered people to move some things back from Fuyao Estate.

With such a long time passing, there was a lot of junk. Sect Leader Yan himself was not a particularly organized man, couldn't remember any of the awful messes that he had made, and was too lazy to put things in order, so he sent Cheng Qian for it. In result, after a long period of strenuously tidying up, Cheng Qian rummaged out a bunch of portraits... of himself.

Yan Zhengming had previously painted countless portraits of Cheng Qian. The majority of them had been destroyed immediately whenever he was heartbroken, but with how many there were, there would always be some fish that slipped the net; a few of them still remained.

The more he saw, the more fond he felt, and quietly hid them away himself. Then, he remembered that Tong Ru had never had time to leave his own portrait behind, while Master's portrait, he had ruined — and that was saying nothing of his sect-uncle Jiang Peng, who'd been a tragedy from beginning to end. Thus, he got the impetus to make things up to his predecessors.

Cheng Qian's calligraphy was proficient, but his painting skill was not great, so he ran off to ask the Sect Leader to make the paintings.

Hearing this, Sect Leader Yan aloofly hooked his fingers towards Cheng Qian, telling him to get his ear in close, and then, while wearing the dignified look of an upright nobleman, brought up some vulgar and unreasonable conditions for that, henceforth showing Cheng Qian what a beast in human clothing looked like.

Cheng Qian immediately decided upon where exactly he was going to put this guy out to dry, kicking the Sect Leader right out the Residence of Peace.

In the end, he'd had no option but to get by with seeking out his second senior. Li Yun happily agreed, bringing along one junior sister that was excited to join in on the fun to splash some drawing ink on the second-to-last floor of the Nine-Floor Library Tower.

During that span of time, their hardworking sister rolled up her sleeves, swept away the dust that had accumulated over the years from the floor, and shook open every single portrait of their forebears, preparing them for cleaning.

All of a sudden, she cried out in alarm. "Ah! Second brother!"

Li Yun was diligently working on paper as per Cheng Qian's instructions, painting with a flourish, and didn't raise his head. "What is it?"

"You're on a painting! Little senior, look!" Shui Keng unfurled a portrait that had yellowed from age; the predecessor on it was dressed untidily, his long hair draped loose across his shoulders, and he had a delicate little prettyboy face. Those features, and that expression, were the spitting image of Li Yun's.

Cheng Qian took another look. Below it clearly read: *Zhenren Wenzhu, accepted into the Fuyao Sect on somesuch year and somesuch month, a part of somesuch generation of disciples. He is uncannily adept in bizarre and obscene skillsets, proficient in a divergent sort of path, and entered the Dao while flying his own lone banner, the details of which are unclear to this day. Because he had a set of nine chains at his side, his method for entering the Dao was called the 'Ninth Chain'.*

Back in the Fuyao inheritance, that elder seemed to have mentioned to Yan Zhengming that a Fuyao ancestor had emerged ‘using the Ninth Chain to enter the Dao’, and he had also given that predecessor’s personal letter to Li Yun.

So... had that just been him returning it to its original owner?

After all that fuss, there had only ever been one person in the Ninth Chain.

This second senior that had actually been only one person through all of eternity completed several masterpieces. They were seen by Yan Zhengming, who had heard the news.

Yan Zhengming admired them for a good long while, then gave one apropos evaluation: “Junior, take a rest for a bit. Stop violating the principles of our ancestors.”

Refusing to accept that, Li Yun proceeded to make a [dangqing](#) of Han Yuan in Nanjiang. One year, during the Mid-Autumn Festival, he brought it over to Han Yuan himself, enthusiastically displaying it for him to see.

After viewing all of it, Han Yuan felt his former feelings for this guy as a sectmate get thoroughly annihilated. Also bringing to mind his experience of being hoodwinked, as he still hadn’t received the true dragon skeleton to this day, he immediately decided to put his new and old hatreds together, and hunted Li Yun all the way to the boundary of Nanjiang... well, that was a story for another time.

Yao King

One day, Nian Dada and You Liang were in the middle of repairing tables, chairs, and stools in the Hall of Ignorance when they saw their second uncle act like a runaway feral dog, whizzing down from the summit while shouting in rapid bursts. “Don’t chase me! I’m going into seclu... n...”

Nian Dada and You Liang looked at each other, confused as to what the hell ‘seclun’ was.

Before the end of that sound was finished, Li Yun had already dashed into an unnamed cave at the mountain’s waist, the wind beneath his feet, and sealed up its entrance with a prohibition on his back hand. The entire act could be labeled as, ‘*someone* has great hand-eye coordination’.

Unexpectedly, the next moment, an irrational band of swordlight descended from the sky, hacking the prohibition that some unknown predecessor had left behind into pieces. Sect Leader Yan showed his face, a murderous aura rolling off of him.

Nian Dada elbowed You Liang, having an expression of awe. “My god, your Master is really powerful.”

“...” You Liang felt like he should switch Masters with Nian Dada, so that the two of them didn’t look like they had entered the wrong sect.

The pursued Li Yun scrambled away in a flurry as he drew a howl out of his throat. “Master! The eldest is about to commit murder! Open your eyes and look, old man! You left too soon! No one can control him, no one can get justice for me! He covers the sky with one hand... Heavens, help me!”

Nian Dada was dumbstruck. This was the first time he had ever heard such systematic anguished howling.

As if sensing something, You Liang looked up in time to see a red shadow dashing through the forest. It was Shui... nope, little aunt Han Tan and a white crane silently slipping by. Like it was something routine, they occupied a hidden spot that was convenient for watching the fun, yet also wouldn't get them a role in the fun being watched.

How many times had the tragic experience of getting caught in the crossfire occurred, for them to have practiced this until it was down pat?

You Liang had quite a bit of a stable mind, so he swiftly deigned to copy the example of his senior. Pushing Nian Dada's skull down, he shut the courtyard door of the Hall of Ignorance, and then, one above and one below, they peered out from the multitude of cracks in the Hall's gate.

This matter could be described as being as long a story that a motherless child would have; in short, all of it hung onto the fact that Li Yun had loose lips when he drank too much, making him getting chased and beaten up not an injustice at all.

It took place a few days back, during the Mid-Autumn Festival. Everyone had drunk a little much, sans the teetotaler Cheng Qian. He caught sight of a miscellaneous book of Li Yun's that described off-kilter charms, and decided to borrow it for a look in a fit of interest. Unexpectedly, the instant he opened it, a 'bookmark' fell out from inside. By happenstance... it was the note that Yan Zhengming had written to Li Yun regarding Heart-Purging Pills.

Cheng Qian naturally recognized the eldest's handwriting, but he genuinely didn't suspect anything, merely casually asking after it.

Yet, Li Yun had gotten so drunk, he couldn't find where North was anymore, mad with intoxication. Hearing such a question, he immediately looked immensely shocked, then roared at a very uncomprehending Cheng Qian. "Eldest! Eldest, you can't blame me for you giving yourself away!"

“...”

Cheng Qian had only brought it up casually. Now that he'd heard this, he couldn't just not ask further.

Following that... it was heard that he had gone to the summit to practice in seclusion the very next day, not even dawdling at the Residence of Peace's gate. Anyone that attempted to go to the summit and 'disturb his seclusion' would have to mentally prepare to get lifted up and thrown down by Shuang Ren.

Fuyao's summit had since become a frozen wasteland. In no more than a few days' time, the village down the mountain would likely be telling ghost stories that said stuff like 'the mountain god's wife died, turning everything white overnight'.

Yan Zhengming was beside himself. With no way to get to Cheng Qian, he'd had no choice but to hunt Li Yun, the cause of this calamity, all across the land.

“Help me!” Li Yun cried. “He's a murderer! Sister! Third brother!”

Shui Keng was hiding out in the dense woods and pretending to be dead, petting the birdie neck of the white crane. “I feel like it'd be a lot safer to go to the backmountain and wage war with Yao Valley. What do you think?” she asked anxiously.

The crane rubbed against her palm, supporting her going back to snatch the throne.

Li Yun let out a miserable shriek, like a pig getting murdered. “None of you have any conscience... Shui Keng! I endured changing diapers to raise you, yet you'll sit and watch me die?!... Xiao Qian! Do you have the heart to let

this senior that you've cowed bear this sin for you?! AAAAAHHH! Eldest, I was wrong! I'll never do it again! Spare my doggy life!..."

All of a sudden, Li Yun's howling and Yan Zhengming's property damage came to a simultaneous halt. Raising his head curiously, Nian Dada saw his Master, ever as graceful as a high immortal, standing upon a massive boulder while holding his sword, coldly observing this farce.

"My Master seems to have come to save all life on Earth..."

You Liang sighed. "Brother Nian, you haven't yet finished your punishment of carving out three-hundred chi of charms. You should still keep some distance from Third Uncle."

Sect Leader Yan, who had just been showing off his might, instantly changed shape, going from an archdemon as cold as frost to a frail Young Master in white clothes. "Xiao Qian..." he called out, looking sheepish.

Cheng Qian glanced at him expressionlessly.

Yan Zhengming shuffled his feet nervously against the ground, but there was an aggravating look of 'I'll lower myself to coax you' on his face. He coughed dryly. "Ahem, fine. I'll give you some words of explanation."

Laughing coldly, Cheng Qian gently stuck Shuang Ren into the ground, ears opened to listen.

The other stiffly wetted his dry and cracking lips. In reality, he knew that the implications of the Heart-Purging Pill were evident at first glance, and there was nothing to explain. No matter what he said next, he would pretty much make everything worse.

Sect Leader Yan was mute for a short moment. At long last, he decided to relinquish his face, point at Li Yun, and push everything onto him with

righteous diction. “It was him that embellished the story in order to sow discord! That note was only to have him make up some ordinary pills for me! What are you, Li Yun? Someone that fears a world not in chaos, right? You can’t go a day without making things hard for me, can you? Ever since childhood, you’ve had improper schemes, and haven’t made a lick of progress!”

Inverting black and white, making a deer out to be a horse... these were things Yan Zhengming had perfected.

He talked and talked, nearly convincing even himself. At the start, he’d been putting on a show of force while being weak on the inside, but that had turned into confidence in the blink of an eye — he was so confident, in fact, that it was completely sincere, as if all of this actually *had* been done by Li Yun.

The latter poked his resentful head out of the cavern that got ruined by a sword cultivator, thinking to himself, *Is it too late for me to rebel against the sect?*

Yan Zhengming viciously stuck him with an eye dagger.

Hairs standing on end, Li Yun shrank his neck back, and spoke in violation of his heart. “Isn’t that just right! Xiao Qian, the eldest here only asked me for antidiarrheals, which he wasn’t used to doing! It had no relation to Heart-Purging Pills! It was all me... m-m-me talking nonsense! Who even knows what I was saying? I deserve to be silenced by the Sect Leader as per sect rules— ow!”

Yan Zhengming sent a sharp burst of true essence tumbling down, which accurately knocked Li Yun down to the ground.

Hearing so, Cheng Qian became all the more furious, but he remained collected on the surface. He felt that Yan Zhengming’s undertone was that

he was not only not going to honestly admit that he was wrong, but had also learned how to lie without blinking.

He had really indulged him too much.

Witnessing Cheng Qian turn around and leave without speaking to him, Yan Zhengming quickly called out to him in fright. “Wait, what are you going to do?”

Cheng Qian didn’t turn his head. “Informing the Sect Leader; I’m going off the mountain to travel for a century.”

Yan Zhengming was tongue-tied, finally sensing that this had gotten out of hand.

Li Yun and the watching-from-a-faraway-hideout Shui Keng were both flabbergasted, too. The latter no longer cared about sitting to the side and observing, spreading out her wings alongside the puffed-up white crane — if her senior brother actually did leave, there would be no one on the Mountain that could suppress the villain that was the Sect Leader.

That awful plight could not come to be!

“Brother, don’t go!” she cried out, her voice so mournful, listeners could shed tears from it.

Yan Zhengming’s lips slightly shifted, a subtle emotion arising in his heart; him raising her hadn’t been in vain. Even though she was typically lazy and gluttonous, at critical times, she stood on his side very stably.

Then, he saw her spread out her wings to block Cheng Qian’s way, and say with a sorrowful, near-weeping face, “If you’re going to leave, take me with you!”

Yan Zhengming: "..."

From top to bottom of this goddamn sect, not a single member wasn't a selfish prick!

In the midst of this chaos, a shrill shriek suddenly came from the backmountain. Everyone startled in quick succession, no longer caring to fight.

Cheng Qian's figure quickly bounced several times, and he reached the top of Fuyao in a wink. He saw that the mountain cave was in turmoil. On account of some violent shaking, the formerly-quiet cold pool of the cave showed a layer of white waves.

"What's going on?" he whispered.

Yan Zhengming listened in for a short moment. "Seems like something's happened in Yao Valley... odd."

Right then, they saw the pool part to two sides, after which Zhenren Zipeng, who had not changed at all in a hundred years, came out. The old hen's eyes were still like a falcon's, but they had no trace of deterrent power towards the people of today.

Yan Zhengming looked down upon her, waiting for her to speak. His stern face, which neither incited disaster nor offended anyone, was intimidating.

It was unknown if Zipeng recognized this youngster that she had sent flying with one feather a century ago. Her expression was complicated as she viewed the nearby Shui Keng, after which she bowed slightly, making a deferential motion. "A great yao rebellion has recently broken out in the Valley. The Yao King is dead, and too much is going on. Please temporarily seal up the mountain cave, Sect Leader."

This news arrived suddenly, but was unsurprising. Past Yao Kings getting switched out had inevitably been accompanied by bloodshed, where the murdering party would take the seat — they weren't even sure if the Yao King that died this time was the same one that had been in power when they had gone to find Han Yuan.

Yan Zhengming furrowed his brow slightly, hands behind his back as he stood at the summit. "Thank you for informing us. If there is anything in the Valley that we can help a bit with, please don't be too polite and simply say it, Zhenren Zipeng."

Those words were a bit arrogant, giving something of a feeling that he didn't place any importance onto the Valley, but Zipeng knew that he had that power.

This generation of the Fuyao Sect was not plentiful in numbers, yet its strength was unprecedentedly awing. There was a sword cultivator in the Sword Spirit Realm, a half-immortal that had undergone heavenly tribulations, a bird that had inherited a three-thousand-year-old yao core, the most unpromising Ninth Chain Daoist that had already cultivated a primordial spirit... and Han Yuan, the devil of the faraway Nanjiang that now intimidated the region, did not need to be mentioned.

Zhenren Zipeng looked at Yan Zhengming with mixed emotions. Deep in the mountains, an unknown amount of time had flowed past while the events of humanity had shifted, a century rushing past in a snap. Back then, Han Muchun had been half-human, half-ghost; even with the Sect Leader Seal in his palm, controlling the entire Mountain would have been difficult, so he had had to set the rule that disciples were not allowed to go to the backmountains. Even when the Heavenly Yao had descended to the world, Lord Beiming's dithering soul had personally calmed things.

Now, she had merely been on a long seclusion, yet the human world had already flipped on its head.

The one before her was aloof and proud, emitting the aura of a generational grandmaster. He was no longer the small child she had once bossed around. At the end, she merely bowed her head with her sleeves overlapping over her stomach. “Many thanks to you, Sect Leader.”

With that, she slowly sank down into the pool.

Such an intrusion caused Cheng Qian to temporarily forget his recent anger. “Seal up the mountain?”

“Just set up a prohibition. I have no plans to go out as of late, and who would dare to cross me to rush to the cave?”

Hearing that bombastic tone, Cheng Qian finally remembered that they were in a cold war, and immediately rolled his eyes. “Is that so? You just get more and more *awe-inspiring*, Sect Leader,” he scathed.

The other suddenly realized that he had lost himself. Heart filled with trepidation, he put on airs in his speech to compensate. “D... don’t. Fuyao is currently unstable, and not too secure. The last time there was a great calamity in Yao Valley, our martial grandfather’s soul was used up! How can you abandon your sect without a care at this critical juncture?!”

Cheng Qian stared at him woodenly, turned, and left.

Yan Zhengming plodded along after him. “Are you going back to the Residence? Okay then, I’ll warm up a bowl of plum tea for you... let’s have a nice chat later. Tch, you’re really spoiled rotten... Xiao Qian, wait up!”

“...” Li Yun cursed silently a couple of times, turned his head, saw Shui Keng staring blankly at the cold pool, and called out to her. “Sister, what are you looking at? Let’s go.”

Her brows furrowed. She looked serious, as if making an important decision.

Li Yun stopped in his tracks. “What is it?”

Shui Keng suddenly raised her head. “Second brother, I want to go to Yao Valley.”

He was taken aback. The crane raised its head, too.

“I’m a greater yao that inherited a yao core! Why would I just watch at the sidelines while the Valley is in turmoil? Our race has a lot of good people in it; do they deserve to get dragged into the fights that greater yao get into every so often? There’s also those old turtles that spit out Heavenly prophecies, talking about whoever is going to be a bringer of death all the time... I’m no bringer of death! I’m going to show them all that!”

When she said that, her body appeared to be on fire. Li Yun was quiet for a time.

Three days later, the entire Fuyao Sect congregated at the backmountains. Shui Keng’s arms were stuffed full of various talismans of unknown usage, each one able to be speculated into sky-high prices. While tidying up for her, Yan Zhengming scolded, “As I see it, you’ve gotten pretty full of yourself. A proper human you are not, you’re going to be chief of the birds... when you get beaten up until you cry, you’re not allowed to come back and whine about it!”

“I’m a powerful yao that’s going to become the Yao King!” she raged.

Li Yun sighed. “Powerful yao? Bullshit. You’ve never left my sight since you were little... alas, you’ve gotten so many ambitions. If you run into trouble in the Valley, just announce the eldest’s name. The yao will be too afraid to upset a sword cultivator for no reason—“

Cheng Qian's brows had never un-knitted this whole time, and at this very moment, he cut off Li Yun's chatter. "How about I go with you on your trip?"

Before Shui Keng had time to protest, Yan Zhengming let out a weird noise from his throat. "What? No!"

Following that, he thought about it, then made a concession. "If you're going, so am I!"

"..." Shui Keng watched as her adventure was about to turn into a one-day-long outing with family in tow.

All of a sudden, a massive, ghost-faced sculpture flew over from far away, its entire body pitch-black as it arrogantly whirled on over. After orbiting the summit a bit, the big bird apprehensively looked at Yan Zhengming and the rest, then landed on the other side of the pool, the eerie demonic qi surrounding it stirring up the water into restlessness.

The sculpture was heard to scream, then suddenly spit out human words in Han Yuan's voice. "I heard that there's unrest in Yao Valley? I'm lending this sculpture to you. If you can't sort out those beasts with this piece of junk, then just die there and don't bother to come back!"

After finishing its master's message, the sculpture resumed its bird cry, flying up as it shrieked. It then proudly landed beside Shui Keng, and belittled itself by bowing its head, forcing her to pet that noble skull.

Shui Keng... *Han Tan's* back sprouted two massive wings that faintly shimmered with burning fire, like red clouds filling the sky. Like so, she stepped into Yao Valley, carrying the ghost-faced sculpture, as well as the various self-protection talismans that her three seniors had given her.

“I’m going to go take on the world!” she said without looking back, sweeping up sky-filling, swishing gales, like a juvenile and awkward King.

“The world, my ass. Isn’t that just a nook in the mountains?” Sect Leader Yan asked. “Get back here for the holidays! Don’t go feral out there and forget your home, you hear? I’ll break your bird legs if you do!”

Shui Keng stumbled, and she fell headfirst into the cold pool.

...This expedition of taking on the world thus started off with a sorry-looking dog eating dirt.

Ascension

Tong Ru had taken in two followers in his lifetime: Jiang Peng, and Han Muchun.

Jiang Peng had had a teacher before him; not being a disciple of his sect, but entrusted to him to look after for an old friend that had passed.

Unwilling to cast away his original Master, Jiang Peng was only a disciple of the sect in name, and had been traveling abroad for over half a year. He was mediocre in talent, slightly naive and inarticulate, not too guarded against others, held no intent to harm people, and had some respect for Tong Ru, though they weren't very close.

Compared to this senior-brother-in-name, his authentic disciple, Han Muchun, was much too vibrant.

Tong Ru would sometimes think that if Han Muchun's life had been a little more peaceful, and he'd had fewer rough patches in his youth, there would have been no opportunity for him to be accepted into his sect. Perhaps he would have been able to go out and be a general or a minister in the secular world, or at least be able to become the greatest scholar of a generation. That thought was caused by his regard for his precious disciple, of course, but it didn't come from nothing.

At his twelfth reckoned year, Han Muchun got onto the roll for the autumnal provincial exams as its top scorer, making a momentary uproar that pressed up against the sky for the sages to hear.

The following year, he should have been going into the capital for the metropolitan exams, but his father happened to pass from serious illness. His mother had died early due to difficult birth, so he and his father had depended upon each other for survival, their affections deep. No longer in the mood to take more exams, Han Muchun brought a few household

members home for the funeral, only to unfortunately come across bandits en-route. All of the others died beneath the blades of the thieves. When Han Muchun's life hung by a thread, he had the fortune to be saved by Tong Ru, who was passing by while collecting medicinal materials.

Commoners had a saying; there was a certain type of person that was too brilliant, and such sophisticates could not remain in the human world, inevitably going back from whence they had come early. Han Muchun might have been born with the fate of an early death; Tong Ru's casual rescue seemed to have just put a small fork in his road, whereupon, a hundred years later, he would yet return to his proper course of an unlucky fate.

At the age of thirteen, Han Muchun was taken back to Fuyao Mountain. After worshipping Tong Ru as a master, he came to witness that cultivators and mortals were not the same, and thus abandoned his hopes of scholarly achievements. A child that had studied hard for so many years suddenly relinquishing it as soon as he said he would inevitably made Tong Ru question him.

Han Muchun had been raising the flowers outside of the Hall of Ignorance to be big and strong. At the time, he spoke casually whilst rolling up his pant legs to water the plants. "Cultivator, or mortal; you can only choose one to be. How can one delve into both sides?"

"Why couldn't they?" Tong Ru asked back.

"Cultivators and mortals are worlds apart. If cultivators of remarkable powers meddled with the affairs of the mortal world, would the mortals not be as ants? Would the human world not be in great chaos? What benefit would cultivators gain from stirring up the mortals? None of them produce anything, and even if they practice inedia, they still need clothes to wear, and to splurge on themselves every once in a while, don't they? Forging tools uses up all sorts of materials, doesn't it? If they could buy them, who

would ever go searching far and wide for them by themselves? Were cultivators to be the same as mortals, everyone would certainly be split up amongst the three religions and nine schools, and inevitably dispute. Would making that extreme sin not cause all the big guys to qi deviate together?”

Tong Ru had never been aware that the other had been inwardly mulling that idea over on the land’s behalf, practically not recognizing this ever-casual disciple of his.

“That’s why,” Han Muchun hummed a little tune as he mumbled, “mixing the two together won’t do anyone any good... everyone says that superpowers will ascend, but I’ve never found record of anyone ascending in the Library Tower. Master, do you think that ‘ascension’ is just a carrot?”

“...It’s... it’s a *what?*”

“A carrot? One that hangs in front of a donkey’s nose. Cultivators are all that donkey chasing after the carrot of ascension that hangs in front of them. They have no choice but to focus all their efforts into chasing it, giving them no spare time to harm the human world.”

Hearing him speak more and more excessively, Tong Ru ended up shooting a smack at his head. “Such nonsense. All you know to do is randomly make things up... how are your studies on the technique I asked you to practice going?”

Han Muchun proudly flung off a spot of mud on his arm. “Taken to Heart, Like a River!”

Tong Ru was enraged to the point that fire sprang three zhang off of him. “It’s ‘Taken to Heart, Like a *Flood*’! If you don’t practice it diligently, it’ll be useless, you disgrace!”

Han Muchun was extremely intelligent, but lazy. His efforts were comparable to the sharpening of a knife; every time he got firmly stuck on that thread Tong Ru would rarely let him off of, he would refused to use even a little bit more strength. Just grasping the estimate degree of 'higher will' took an unknown amount of brainpower, yet he seemed to prefer to spend brainpower than spend physical power.

This made Tong Ru, who believed himself to 'need' talents to teach, worry near to death.

Jiang Peng was not present the year round, leaving just this one precious disciple of his, though. Tong Ru watched him grow from a half-grown youth to a handsome young man, and could never steel himself to be too strict. Every once in a while, when he seized some free time, he couldn't help but give him a few words of advice. "Xiao Chun, it is like we cultivators are working our boats against the current, led along by the Great Dao our whole lives, pursued by our lifespans. We dare not slack off in the slightest... peoples' talents are indeed split up into different grades, and your aptitude is laudable, but after you walk this path for a long time, you will understand that luck and inner character are much more important than talent."

Han Muchun obediently offered up tea, smiling as ingratiatingly as ever on his surface. "Drink, Master."

With his earnest advice taken as wind past the other's ears, Tong Ru didn't accept the cup, but picked up the novella next to him at lightning speed, then thrashed it at Han Muchun's forehead. "Lord Graduate of Provincials, which tome of the sages taught you to be so virtuous?"

He didn't actually hit him, and Han Muchun didn't actually dodge, merely shrinking his neck back a bit with a grin. "Tomes aren't even what I want to read. To tell the truth, I always wanted to be an ordinary gardener, but my father's health was never good, and he kept saying that he was afraid that he

wouldn't see me grow up to become anything. Then, I thought of taking the exams a little bit earlier, and getting an honor to let him feel at ease... now, he's gone. You're my only family, Master."

Saying as much, he lowered his gaze, looking at the slightly rippled surface of the tea in the cup. His features were blurred in the liquid.

Tong Ru felt a tremble in his heart at the word 'family'.

Han Muchun's eyes curved up. "I'll be nice and filial to you, of course. Once..."

He had wanted to say, 'Once you're old, I'll take care of you,' but he remembered afterwards that his Master was apparently unaging, so he changed his wording in a spur of the moment. "Once spring comes, you'll be able to see the Mountain in a full bloom of beautiful reds and purples! Cultivation can be done with half the effort when you're in a good mood!"

...All that talk, and he still wanted to be a gardener.

Having nowhere to put his face added onto a soft heart, Tong Ru was speechless, only able to roll his eyes.

That spring, it truly was lively on Fuyao, the mountain flowers vivid, the bees and butterflies forming groups. The birds of Yao Valley were amazed, fighting each other for a look. Han Muchun had his pant legs rolled up, one short and one long, sitting far away on a gardening hoe that was floating in the air, and waved excitedly at Tong Ru. "Master, look at this mountainful of flowers I planted for you!"

Tong Ru had always felt that it was apparently his fate to be alone. For so many years, if he hadn't been cultivating, he had been swapping pointers with his Daoist friends — no one had ever treated him this closely, to the point of unbridledness.

For this one that wore a desire to curry favor with him on his face, he immediately pardoned the prodigal disciple for the ‘triviality’ of him having stolen his talismans several days back to sell them for wine.

The dependence upon each other for survival thereafter dissipated misery.

Spring’s end approached, and the flowers wilted. Tong Ru was unwilling to see this, and wanted to use a technique to preserve them, but Han Muchun stopped him. “If they wilt, they wilt. They’ll bloom again next year. Spring blooms, autumn fruits, the shade is green, the snow is white; cycles of change are commonplace, and each has their own advantages. Don’t delay one for the sake of another.”

Powerful people flew into the sky to flee the ground, inevitably being aloof and hermetic, feeling themselves to be the sole dominance amongst all life. After hearing that point of view, Tong Ru thought, in both emotion and self-mockery, *Right. If one is so ‘dominant’, what can they do all by themselves? Would they not be bored after a long time passes? There’s no benefit to it.*

People looked forward to ‘next years’ precisely because of the withering and thriving, the rising then falling.

The wilted flowers were gathered up by Han Muchun. He added honey to them, then fermented several tens of jars of hundred-flower wine, burying each one beneath a tree. To this end, he had delayed his charm lessons for about eight days, and asked Tong Ru to punish him on the final one.

Following the next season, what was buried became a delicacy of the human world. When paired with the fat crabs from the little river behind the mountain, it was like a match made in the Heavens.

Everyone wanted to live for a few more years, but if that life was full of hardships, absolutely friendless, required a spear by the pillow, and never allowed for a moment’s peace, what would be the fun in that?

Tong Ru had never thought of that principle before. For as long as he could remember, he had been on Fuyao Mountain, cultivating without rest, accustomed to blandness. Every day had been like drinking plain water, where he'd had no idea what sweetness or bitterness was...

Until he had met Han Muchun.

Hundreds of years rushed past like lights, only giving him this drop of flavor, the taste of which had capsized his soul.

The sweetness was the sweet of the hundred-flower wine. The bitterness was the bitter of having his three hun souls attached to a copper coin, then watching Fuyao Mountain grow weeds aplenty, with no one to tend to any flowers.

He observed his Xiao Chun inhabiting the body of a weasel, sitting quietly for a very long time each night by the mess of lanterns in the Hall of Ignorance, his delicate eyes half-closed. It was like he was taking part in a meditation others couldn't comprehend, and also like he was immersed inside the Sect Leader Seal's years of memories.

Tong Ru was unsure if he had ever left anything behind in the Seal, nor whether Han Muchun had seen them or not, and even less so... what he would think, if he knew.

It seemed like the sweetness had been just for a split second, yet the bitterness was lasting years.

Then, they met. In the Valley of No Worries, which was inaccessible to living beings, Han Muchun used his struggling primordial spirit to trap his one remaining soul in the Valley.

It was, in truth, just a prison drawn in dirt. Even if his primordial spirit was scattered and only his remnant soul remained, Tong Ru was still the

inheritor of Beiming. If he really wanted to break free, Han Muchun's forever-average cultivation base would be, when it came to him, nothing too big to handle.

However, even if he was hacked to pieces, Tong Ru was a complete glutton for punishment. With some trepidation, he accepted his own sentencing in the world, as well as the conclusion of his soul flying away and scattering, because living and dying together with a certain someone was practically a blessing he couldn't have found himself, had he searched.

There wasn't more hundred-flower wine, however.

Before this, he had always felt that his precious disciple acted too warmly, and was one to go with the flow a bit. It was only later on that he learned that whether one was a mortal or a cultivator, as long as they had enough things in their life that they could die nine times over for and not regret, the other details could be left alone.

Never once had he asked, 'What did you look at in the Seal, for all those years?'...

Until the moment his soul was returning to the world.

In said moment, Han Muchun suddenly grabbed his hand much too intimately. Inside his eyes, there looked to be a vast river of stars.

Even if pining never bore any fruit, there was no harm in melancholy turning to a pure craze.

In all likelihood, if one could die without regrets, that could be seen as ascending, couldn't it?

[1] From a poem of the same name as the first line, by [Tao Yuanming](#). ([Not my favorite full version, but here's one.](#))

[2] The cultivator says “ ”, where qian is the first half of /qiankun, ‘universe’. CQ mishears it as the qian for money/ and the qian for before/ . I went with ‘uniforms’ because that’s just as dumb a guess as ‘money’, and ‘unity’ because it kind of makes as much sense as ‘before’.

[3] — jiqianli, ‘several thousand miles. However, Cheng Qian mentally misunderstood the Ji as , which is an actual surname. What a troll.